

DECEMBER 2021

SOVEREIGN
GRACE
JOURNAL

Our Statement of Faith



*By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us,
guard the good deposit entrusted to you.*

2 TIMOTHY 1:14

Our Statement of Faith

DECEMBER 2021
ISSUE 3

EDITORIAL

Editor-in-Chief Mark Prater

Executive Editor Jeff Purswell

General Editor Jared Mellinger

DESIGN & LAYOUT

Designed Jordan Daniel Singer

Typesetting Erin Radano

All Scripture references are from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

Sovereign Grace Churches © 2021
sovereigngrace.com



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction (Mark Prater)	7
An Introduction to Our <i>Statement of Faith</i> (Jeff Purswell)	11
Putting on the Belt of Truth in a Post-Truth World (Jimmy Cannon)	19
The Value of Historic Creeds and Confessions (Alex Chen)	23
Knowing is for Living (Matthew Williams)	31
“What More Can He Say?": The Finality and Sufficiency of Scripture (Walt Alexander)	35
Sustained by the Attributes of God (Bill Patton)	41
God’s Grace in Election (C.J. Mahaney)	46
The Enduring Centrality of the Local Church (Warren Boettcher)	56
A Spirit-Filled People (Joselo Mercado)	62
The Priority of Application (Ken Mellinger)	67
Biblical Faithfulness in an Age of Gender Confusion (Brian Chesemore)	72
Teaching Theology to Children (Marty Machowski)	78

Laboring Together: The Process of Creating our Statement of Faith
(Josh Blount) 82

Build Something Durable: The Value of Thinking Institutionally
(Jared Mellinger) 86

RECOMMENDED READING

Concise Theology, J.I. Packer (Aaron Law) 96

The Need for Creeds Today, J.V. Fesko (Riley Spring) 99

Systematic Theology, 2nd Edition, Wayne Grudem
(Jeff Purswell) 102

Reading the Bible Supernaturally, John Piper
(Keith Collins) 106

INTRODUCTION

MARK PRATER

I don't think I will ever forget the gratitude to God that I felt in that moment and the sense that something historic was happening.

It was November 10, 2020, during our annual Council of Elders meeting. First, I listened as each delegate voted to approve the new *Statement of Faith* for Sovereign Grace Churches. Then, after the unanimous approval was announced, there was a silent pause followed by joy-filled applause. It was the culmination of seven years of hard work, and together we celebrated the goodness and faithfulness of God to us.

This third edition of the *Sovereign Grace Journal* is devoted to our *Statement of Faith*. As a confessional document, the *Statement of Faith* unites our family of churches theologically, defines the sound doctrine we share, and protects our churches from error. It plays a vital role in our mission to plant and strengthen churches for the glory of God.

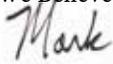
As always, I am grateful for each of the pastors who contributed to this issue. Alex Chen has written a helpful piece entitled "The Value of Historic Creeds and Confessions" to guide us in treasuring the great confessional documents of the church in past centuries. In addition, several pieces reflect on a particular doctrinal truth affirmed in our *Statement of Faith*: Walt Alexander on the

sufficiency of Scripture, Bill Patton on the attributes of God, Brian Chesemore on gender identity, and others.

If you've read *Systematic Theology* by Wayne Grudem, then don't miss Jeff Purswell's review of Grudem's 2nd edition of *Systematic Theology*. And, be sure to check out the other book recommendations as well.

I want to thank each of the men who served on the Theology Committee over the last seven years. These brothers, led by Jeff Purswell, put in many hours of research, study, and writing to produce our new *Statement of Faith*. We dedicate this edition of the *Sovereign Grace Journal* to you men to express our appreciation for the hard work you did in serving our family of churches now and for generations to come.

We Believe,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

AN INTRODUCTION TO OUR STATEMENT OF FAITH

JEFF PURSWELL

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

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

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

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

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

A Historic Occasion

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

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

This new Statement of Faith is a testimony to God’s faithfulness to SGC over the decades.

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

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

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

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

Distinguishing Marks

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

- ***Historically Informed***

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

- ***Ecclesiological Specific***

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

- ***Gospel Oriented***

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

- ***Appropriately Expressed***

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

Seven Years in the Making

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

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

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

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

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

The result was a process that fostered excitement and unity around the truths we confess.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hopes for the Future

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

- ***Protection***

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

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

- ***Unity***

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

- ***Instruction***

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

- ***Worship***

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

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

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

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

Jeff Purswell

Director of Theology and Chair, SGC Theology Committee

August 14, 2021

JEFF PURSWELL

Jeff Purswell is an elder at [Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville](#) (Louisville, KY), the Director of Theology for Sovereign Grace Churches, and the dean of the [Sovereign Grace Pastors College](#).

PUTTING ON THE BELT OF TRUTH IN A POST- TRUTH WORLD

JIMMY CANNON

Oxford Dictionaries added the word "post-truth" to its pages in 2016 after the word's usage increased 2,000% over the year before (when "selfie" was added, appropriately enough).

The BBC explained: "[Post-truth] is defined as an adjective relating to circumstances in which objective facts are less influential... than emotional appeals." *Oxford Dictionaries'* Casper Grathwohl noted at the time: "I wouldn't be surprised if post-truth becomes one of the defining words of our time." Or even one of its defining ideas.

The Trouble with Truth

Our prevailing culture finds truth—objective truth—problematic, but to affirm *your* truth is broadly accepted. "Feel free to hold to a truth," it implies, "a *personal* truth, so long as it's *yours*. (And so long as your truth is not imposed on *me*.)"

The problem with this subjective approach to truth is it shape-shifts with every personal impulse. It has no moral center. Instead, it leans heavily on human emotion and opinion to determine what's right and wrong. For Christians, post-truth is not just a slipshod moral compass; it's *anti-biblical*.

All of Scripture extols the virtue, the perfection, and the sufficiency of the Bible. (Yes, God's Word is allowed to be self-referential because it's *God's*

Word.) At the same time, Scripture confirms we sinners are incapable of arriving at the truth on our own. Psalm 36:9 recognizes this reality, saying, "In your light do we see light." We're hopelessly blind to God's lightning-bright truth, absent the Holy Spirit's illumination.

First Things First

Thank God then—*really, thank God!*—he doesn't keep us in the dark. His revealed truth is written in black and white, and his Word equips Christians to resist the lies of this fallen world.

Ephesians 6:11-14a instructs us:

"Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth...."

*God's Word equips
Christians to resist
the lies of this
fallen world.*

God wants us to know that we have a real enemy, the scheming devil, who wants nothing more than to impress people into his system of lies. Post-truth is one in a long line of them.

Paul then places the armor of God in its proper context: a spiritual war between God and evil "cosmic powers." He acknowledges the devil's age-old subversion of truth, telling his first-century readers to put on the "belt of truth" *first*.

But taking inventory of the *whole armor of God*, is the belt the first thing that comes to mind? I tend to think sword. Or for defense, a shield, helmet, or breastplate. But not a belt.

Gucci and "Gird Up Your Loins"

Paul is not talking about a fashion statement here; there were no Gucci belts in first-century Ephesus. So, please permit me to get a bit old school for a moment. The *King James Bible* says, "Gird up your loins." Which sounds a bit weird to our 21st-century Western ears!

However, to Paul's original audience, it meant one of two things: you were either preparing to work or *preparing for war*. It meant gathering your robe and tucking it into your belt so you were unencumbered.

Further, the belt was essential to a soldier's tactical gear. Among other things, it helped support his breastplate and held his sword in place.

To extend the metaphor, the "belt of truth"—God's inerrant Word—is the centerpiece of a Christian's spiritual armor. Without it, we lose our footing, and other gear is rendered ineffective. Take, for instance, the "shield of faith" (Eph. 6:16a). *Faith without the ballast of biblical truth is empty*. Even Christians get tripped up when they place faith in something unbiblical and ultimately untrue. Without truth, we would have a flimsy shield against the "flaming darts of the evil one" (Eph. 6:16b)."

Upside-down Eden

Satan doesn't fight like a gentleman (in case the whole "flaming darts" thing didn't give it away). And spiritual battle isn't like an 18th-century duel. There's no scheduling a mutually convenient time for a face-to-face show-down. Nope, Satan *ambushes* us, most often when we're war-weary and depleted.

Perhaps there's no greater biblical example of this than Jesus' wilderness temptation (See Matt. 4:1-11). After Jesus has fasted 40 days and nights, alone in a desert wasteland, Satan, "the tempter," enters the scene. Observe: Satan's tactics haven't changed since the Garden of Eden.

The Bible tells us Jesus is hungry at this point, and we can assume physically spent. Knowing this, Satan's first temptation is for Jesus to turn rocks into bread to satisfy his gnawing hunger. When Jesus doesn't take the bait, Satan raises the stakes on the temptations until, at last, Satan offers Jesus a worldly kingdom... if only Jesus will grovel before him.

"It is Written"

Jesus' response to Satan is instructive for us today. His rebuttal? The Spirit-breathed Word of truth, starting with three charged words: "It is written."

In a very real sense then, *Jesus spoke truth to power*—an expression that's been repeated over the past few years as people call for justice. Originally attributed to 20th-century Quaker activists, "speaking truth to power" means appealing to those in authority to carry out justice. To do the right thing for the good of society.

But the phrase is shaken loose of meaning in a post-truth society. When the truth is a function of popular opinion and corruptible power brokers, there's no hope for lasting justice regarding the injustices of racism, sexism, and abuse, to name just a few. "Speaking truth to power" becomes nothing more than replacing someone else's personal bias with my own.

Speaking Truth to Power

Christians, however, have a singular advantage. When we're weak, tempted, and tried, we can stand—as Jesus did—on biblical, not-a-matter-of-personal-opinion truth.

And when we see our fellow travelers similarly harassed, we can light their path with the lantern of God's good and gracious truth. And, we can lift their cause to the incorruptible, all-powerful King of kings!

So as we battle on, we find the "belt of truth" embraces and encircles us. "[It] is your foundation garment," says Iain Duguid. "Put it on; wear it; be found in it day and night—for in Christ that truth will set you free from the grip of Satan's powerful lies."¹

1. IAIN DUGUID, *THE WHOLE ARMOR OF GOD* (WHEATON, IL, CROSSWAY, 2019), 36.

JIMMY CANNON

Jimmy Cannon is senior pastor of [Sovereign Grace Church](#) (Abington & White Marsh, MD).

THE VALUE OF HISTORIC CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS

ALEX CHEN

In 2015, Covenant Fellowship Church launched Risen Hope Church in the suburbs of Philadelphia. But five months later, the energy and joy of this new mission work had come to a screeching halt when we experienced the tragic and surprising death of one of our key leaders. He was a pillar in the church—a small group leader, ministry team leader, and Sunday school teacher. Our church was in shock. We gathered on Sunday wanting to worship, but the sense of loss hung heavily in the air. So what does a pastor say in a moment like that?

I read the introduction to the *Heidelberg Catechism*, which begins with this question: “What is your only comfort in life and in death?”

The answer couldn’t have been more relevant for us: “That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven: in fact all things must work together for my salvation...”

In that moment of heart-breaking loss, we needed to be reminded that the Good Shepherd didn’t leave or forsake us: *That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ*. We needed the ministry of theology; we needed the great unchanging truths of

Scripture, as summarized and stated by a historic confession of the faith.

In every generation, the creeds and confessions of the church of Christ have always strengthened, comforted, and protected God's people. Our new *Statement of Faith (SoF)* has these same goals in view. In affirming this new statement, we are in no way devaluing creeds and confessions of the past. Rather, we are honoring the saints of centuries past by reaffirming and restating the truths they held dear (sometimes even borrowing their language), and we are continuing the same work carried out by the framers of those historic confessions: summarizing the truth of God for our generation, for our children, and our children's children.

Building on the Past

We are intentionally standing on the shoulders of others.

Our new Sovereign Grace *Statement of Faith* encapsulates the truths we hold dear in life and death. Our statement of faith is:

- Orthodox (rooted in historic, biblical Christianity),
- Reformed (birthed out of the Protestant Reformation and the five solas),
- Evangelical (summons us to be born again), and
- Confessional (commits our denomination to a significant body of doctrine).

This means we didn't reinvent the wheel! Our *SoF* draws from and is built upon what the church has learned throughout its two millennia. We dare not get creative with the truth or seek to invent new doctrine. We are intentionally standing on the shoulders of others.

Following in the footsteps of the *Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF 1.10)*, we state upfront our submission to Scripture: "Scripture alone is our supreme and final authority and the rule of faith and life. The Scriptures must not be added to or taken away from, and all creeds, confessions, teachings, and prophecies are to be tested by the final authority of God's Word" (*SoF*)

section 1, "The Scriptures").

Nevertheless, even Scripture is self-aware that teaching must be summarized so that it can be taught and passed down to future generations. "Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 1:13; cf. 1 Tim. 6:3-4). Certain patterns of sound words correctly represent and transmit the faith and love in Christ Jesus, and by implication, others don't. It is those faithful patterns of sound words that would eventually develop into our creeds and confessions.

Ancient Formulations

The Apostles' Creed is one of the earliest patterns of sound words accepted by the church. It articulates the central beliefs of the Christian faith:

*I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.
And in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord;
who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;
he descended into the grave;
the third day he rose again from the dead;
He ascended in heaven, and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Ghost,
the holy catholic church;
the communion of saints;
the forgiveness of sins;
the resurrection of the body;
and the life everlasting. Amen.*

Each phrase serves as an important theological header. Early in the history of our church, Risen Hope did a sermon series on the Apostles' Creed. This would assure those newer to the church that while we were a new church, we were not inventing anything new and that our church was built on a body of Christian doctrine. In doing this, we were following in the footsteps of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, first published in 1563 in Heidelberg, Germany, to

unite and catechize the people of that province.¹ Questions 23-58 (over 25% of the entire catechism) are devoted to unfolding the truths of the Apostles' Creed. Heidelberg is written in a first-person format, which makes it intensely personal, warm, and pastoral.² As we read and meditate on Heidelberg in our church and home, it's as if the arms of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ himself, come around our shoulders and embrace us.

Take, for instance, Q52: "How does Christ's return 'to judge the living and the dead' comfort you?" Answer: "In all my distress and persecution I turn my eyes to the heavens and confidently await as judge the very One who has already stood trial in my place before God and so has removed the whole curse from me. All His enemies and mine He will condemn to everlasting punishment: but me and all His chosen ones He will take along with Him into the joy and the glory of heaven."

Clarifying Biblical Doctrines

Before there was Heidelberg, the Nicene Creed and others built upon the Apostles' Creed to define boundaries of orthodoxy for the doctrine of God and Christ. It does matter whether God is Triune and Jesus is truly God. These aren't ivory-tower concerns. As Jesus prayed in John 17, eternal life hinges upon knowing and rightly worshiping God: "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). Denial of essential Christian doctrine is a denial of the Christian faith.

For example, consider the nature of the Son of God. The Apostles' Creed simply states, "[I believe] in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord," as there was no need at that time to do more than affirm Jesus as the Son of God.

However, when Arius taught that Jesus was a created being, the first and greatest of God's creatures, but not fully God, the church needed to clarify what is meant by "Son of God." Does that mean fully God or something less than God? If Jesus isn't fully God, how can He save us, restore us to God, and serve as our sinless substitute and mediator? If Jesus isn't God, we dare not worship Him. So the Nicene Creed explicitly spelled out the full deity of the Son. It includes this statement: "[We believe in] one Lord Jesus Christ,

1. CARL TRUEMAN, *THE CREEDAL IMPERATIVE* (WHEATON, IL: CROSSWAY, 2012), 121.

2. *IBID.*

the Son of God, the only-begotten of His Father, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father." A later version in 381 AD would also affirm the divinity of the Holy Spirit.

If you're a pastor, does your worship singing, prayers, ordinances, and preaching glorify the Father, Son, and Spirit? This doesn't mean every Sunday service requires a systematic theology treatise on the Trinity. But our doctrine of God must drive our worship of the Triune God: "the Father originates, the Son accomplishes, and the Spirit completes" (*SoF* section 2, "The Triune God"). Creeds and confessions serve as another set of eyes to make sure our ministry appropriately, faithfully, and proportionately captures the teaching of Scripture.

To clarify important biblical doctrines where the Roman Catholic church had erred, Reformed confessions would add further details on the Lord's Supper (clarifying that the bread and the cup do not become the body and blood of Christ), the gospel, and justification (we are saved by grace alone through faith alone), and Scripture (God's Word has the sole and ultimate authority).

*Our doctrine of
God must drive our
worship of the Triune
God.*

To clarify the doctrines of grace where Arminians had erred, the confessions would also speak directly about God's sovereignty in election. This would safeguard justification by grace. We can't even claim any credit for our faith, which itself is a gift of God. Borrowing language from *WCF*, our *SoF* reads, "God in His great love, before the foundation of the world, chose those whom he would save in Christ Jesus. God's election is entirely gracious and not at all conditioned upon foreseen faith, obedience, perseverance, or any merit in those whom God has chosen. His decision to set his saving love on the elect is based entirely on His sovereign will and good pleasure." (*SoF* section 3, "God's Sovereign Purposes").

Contending for our Faith Today

Our *SoF* not only builds upon the past, but it also provides us with the in-

tellectual and spiritual tools to contend, in our day, for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). Every generation must contend for the truth of Scripture in its particular time and place. Even as we benefit from past victories, we face fresh challenges.

Take, for example, the current controversies over biblical teaching on gender, sexuality, and marriage. How does the Bible define these, why does it matter, and how do we articulate our rationale? Though first published in 1646, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* is still relevant today:

- “After God had made all other creatures, He created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls...” (WCF 4.2)
- “Marriage is to be between one man and one woman...” (WCF 24.1)

However, the WCF didn't have to address more specifically the culture's open rebellion against its Creator in the ideas that gender is something one can choose (and isn't chosen for us by the Creator) and that sexual relations can be any arrangement (or number) of partners who give their mutual consent. As churches continue to capitulate, our *SoF* reiterates and clarifies what the church has affirmed for two millennia:

- “Gender, designated by God through our biological sex, is, therefore, neither incidental to our identity nor fluid in its definition, but is essential to our identity as male and female” (*SoF* section 4, "Creation, Providence, and Man").
- “God instituted marriage as the union of one man and one woman who complement each other in a one-flesh union that ultimately serves as a type of the union between Christ and His church. This remains the only normative pattern of sexual relations for humanity” (*SoF* section 4, "Creation, Providence, and Man").

It's also noteworthy to point out explicit statements on the sanctity of human life, now under greater assault through abortion and euthanasia: “... all people remain God's image-bearers, capable of fellowship with Him and possessing intrinsic dignity and value at every stage of life from conception to death” (*SoF* section 4, "Creation, Providence, and Man").

But our *SoF* doesn't just contend for primary doctrinal issues, such as the Trinity, incarnation, justification, and man's creation in God's image. This

document codifies the theological and biblical convictions that define Sovereign Grace Churches. Our *SoF* unifies us around what the Bible teaches, even if we might disagree with other gospel-preaching churches.

For instance, while we would agree with much of *WCF* chapter 28 on baptism, we disagree with the doctrine of infant baptism and affirm that baptism is only for believers: “Baptism is an initiatory, unrepeated sacrament for those who come to faith in Christ” (*SoF* section 12, “The Church of Christ”).

Finally, it’s worth noting that while the *WCF* seems to make room for prophetic giftings (“private spirits” are mentioned in *WCF* 1.10, and a number of the *WCF* authors held that certain kinds of prophecy continued), our *SoF* goes much further by denying historic cessationism and encouraging us to pursue and practice all the gifts of the Spirit: “...the full range of spiritual gifts remain at work in the church and are given for the good of the church and its witness to the world. We are therefore to earnestly desire and practice them until Christ returns.” (*SoF* section 10, “The Empowering Ministry of the Spirit”).

A Rich Reformation Heritage

In this brief article, I’ve scratched the surface of the rich Reformation heritage that we enjoy and hopefully whetted your appetite for more. Consider reading *The Need for Creeds Today* by J.V. Fesko or *The Creedal Imperative* by Carl Trueman for further study.

For those who are pastors or involved in Sunday planning: Let the historic Reformed confessions serve you as you plan your worship services. Let them help you think through gospel applications. (The *Westminster Catechism* has wonderful sections devoted to each of the Ten Commandments, expounding them in light of New Covenant grace.) Let them strengthen and comfort your church. (Entire sermons could be preached through the introduction of Heidelberg alone.)

For all Christians: Consider reading the historic confessions devotionally. There is a wealth of truth to be treasured in them. Much like singing songs from centuries past, you will find these doctrinal statements from centuries past uniquely edifying to your soul. And, be sure to read past creeds and confessions in light of our own *SoF* in order to deepen our denominational convictions and celebrate our shared values.

It is a joyful thing to have our own confessional document. God has been very kind to us. Let's make sure this moment deepens and does not lessen our valuing of the rich statements of our faith made by generations past.

ALEX CHEN

Alex Chen is an elder at [Risen Hope Church](#) (Prospect Park, PA).

KNOWING IS FOR LIVING

MATTHEW WILLIAMS

An older gentleman visiting our church once said to me, “You know, pastor, I’m not really into all that doctrine stuff. It just divides people. What really counts is whether we’re following Jesus.” If a friend shared that opinion with you, how would you respond? Is doctrine important? Do the details of what you believe about God really matter? Or are most of us better off leaving things like our recently adopted *Statement of Faith* to the professionals?

On one level, I sympathize with the impulse of the man I spoke with that day. When God’s people part ways over minor issues where Scripture stops short of mandating a particular position, our unity in Christ is denigrated, and the integrity of our gospel witness suffers.

However, the solution to needless division and the key to Christian unity is never to minimize the importance of doctrine but rather to elevate the priority of sound doctrine. Theology matters because nothing is more influential in determining the course of our life, both corporately and individually, than what we choose to believe about God.

Consider some of what Scripture teaches about the priority of doctrine and our response to it.

We All Have a Functional Theology

Every human being navigates life according to some set of ruling convic-

tions or principles. It's part of our nature as image-bearers of God. What we do on the outside is invariably determined by what we believe is true on the inside. Solomon affirms as much in Proverbs 4:23, "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life." Even when our core convictions remain unconscious or unarticulated, we cannot separate what we believe from how we live.

Think about a typical toddler tantrum. What kind of heart-level beliefs do they reveal? (A) I am in charge, (B) life is found in getting what I want, and (C) other people exist to satisfy my wants or suffer the consequences. Notice every one of those beliefs is theological in the sense that it makes a corresponding assertion about God. (A) God is not in charge, (B) I cannot trust God to give me life, and (C) God created other people to serve me.

*The way you live
always reveals what
you really think is
true about God.*

The Apostle Paul makes the same connection between behavior and belief in 1 Timothy 1:10, where he concludes a lengthy list of sinful actions with the expansive summary, "and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine." He makes the same point in Romans 1:25. Every disobedient act results from a prior decision to exchange "the truth about God for a lie."

Whether you are a protesting toddler or a professing atheist, the way you live always reveals what you really think is true about God. In that sense, there is no such thing as an irreligious person. We all hold fast to some sort of doctrine in every moment of our life, even if our doctrine says God does not exist. The critical question is not whether we have a functional theology but whether our functional theology is true or false.

Following Jesus Requires Knowing Jesus

The tendency to minimize the importance of Bible doctrine reveals a failure to understand the connection between knowing Jesus and following Jesus. How can we follow someone we don't know? How can we love someone we don't understand? How can we claim to obey God in every area of life unless we carefully weigh his every word? The reason we must give careful attention to sound doctrine, to what God himself has revealed about his

character and his ways, is not to have a tidy box of “correct” beliefs that sits on a shelf, but to know God for who he is so we might love and obey him for who he is.

In Matthew 7:24-27, Jesus explains what sets apart the wise man from the fool. The wise man “hears these words of mine and does them,” building the house of his life on the rock of Christ. If our concept of following Jesus is not grounded in hearing his words (paying attention to sound doctrine) and doing his words (applying sound doctrine), then we are not following Jesus. Instead, we are following a savior of our own making. We are building our house on sand.

Becoming a Christian and growing as a Christian both require a willful choice to embrace the sound doctrine of the gospel with a heart of repentance and faith toward God. As Paul exhorted his apostolic protégé, Timothy, “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 1:13).

Knowledge Without Obedience will Destroy You

In the churches of Sovereign Grace, we value and seek to practice biblical preaching. It is a strength that we value sound doctrine. But with that strength comes a tremendous spiritual danger. I see it in my own heart. I see it in the men and women to whom I endeavor to preach God’s Word week after week. The danger is that we readily think we are obeying God simply because we know what His Word says.

We must not be deceived. Merely hearing the Word saves no one. In fact, it has the exact opposite effect over time. Absent obedience, our hearts become spiritually dull. The repetitive act of listening to sound doctrine without applying the truth numbs our souls to its true force. When we fail to put it into practice, when we refuse to humbly respond to the claim it makes on our lives, we are no different than the demons. “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder” (James 2:19).

J.C. Ryle’s observation of Liverpool, England in the 19th century remains just as true in our day:

Nothing is more common than to hear people saying of doctrine or duty - ‘We know it, we know it;’ while they sit still in unbelief or

disobedience. They actually seem to flatter themselves that there is something creditable and redeeming in knowledge, even when it bears no fruit in heart, character, or life. Yet, the truth is precisely the other way. To know what we ought to be, believe, and do, and yet to be unaffected by our knowledge, only adds to our guilt in the sight of God.¹

The purpose of sound doctrine is not mental information but spiritual transformation. So do not content yourself with checking all the right theological boxes. Do not say, “I know the truth; I’m good.” Push further. Probe deeper. Ask a Christian friend, “Am I living any differently this month because of the word I heard preached last month?” The pathway to joy and blessing determines that the sound doctrine in our heads will produce the obedience of faith in our lives. “If you know these things, blessed are you *if you do them*” (John 13:17).

A Holy Responsibility

With the ratification of our new *Statement of Faith*, the churches of Sovereign Grace have made the bold pronouncement, “Doctrine matters!” But it matters, not as an intellectual exercise or obligatory affirmation, but as a means for us to know, love, and glorify God.

In an age that mistakes orthodoxy for intolerance, the church has a holy responsibility to commend the beauty of sound doctrine by living “in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God” (1 Tim. 1:11). May the Spirit help us regularly evaluate our functional theology, relentlessly pursue a deeper knowledge of Jesus, and diligently practice our profession as “a doer who acts” (James 1:25).

1. J.C. RYLE, *EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON THE GOSPELS VOL 4: JOHN* (SHAWNEE, KS: GIDEON HOUSE BOOKS, 2016), 206.

MATTHEW WILLIAMS

Matthew Willams is senior pastor at [KingsWay Community Church](#) (Midlothian, VA).

“WHAT MORE CAN HE SAY?”: THE FINALITY AND SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE

WALT ALEXANDER

“The Word of God is therefore necessary and wholly sufficient for knowing the Father’s love in Christ, experiencing his glorious plan of redemption, and being instructed in the way of fruitful and godly living.”

(The Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith, “The Scriptures”)

The first verse to the hymn “How Firm a Foundation” concludes with a powerful truth:

*What more can he say than to you he hath said,
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?¹*

When I sing that line, I often ponder its massive implications. In a culture filled with social media feeds and hot takes, it’s so easy to conclude that

1. ORIGINAL WORDS BY “K” IN RIPPON’S HYMNS (1787). TRADITIONAL AMERICAN MELODY. PUBLIC DOMAIN.

what we need most is for God to say more. What he has said in Scripture is great, but is it enough?

We tend to think we need *more*. *More* confirmations of the will of God. *More* explanations about why we suffer. *More* updated instructions for our culture's hot button issues. *More* prophecies about what is happening in America and throughout the world.

Have you ever wanted *more*?

The danger of this desire for more is not merely that we discard what God has spoken in Scripture, but that we also fail to plumb the depths of what God has spoken in Scripture *for* whatever we will face. As our *Statement of Faith* affirms, "Scripture alone is our supreme and final authority and the rule of faith and life."²

*We need to
continually defend
the finality and
sufficiency of
Scripture.*

The Bible does not tell us everything, but it does tell everything we need to know to love and honor God. We do not need more. But we do need to continually defend the finality and sufficiency of Scripture so that we can be better grounded in what God has said for whatever we will face.

The Basis of Scripture's Sufficiency

The church has historically affirmed the sufficiency of Scripture.³ However, the sufficiency of Scripture was challenged and clarified in the Reformation when confronting Catholicism's upholding of the Church's teaching (tradition) alongside Scripture as authoritative. The Reformers strongly rejected the elevation of tradition based on the finality of redemption and the closing of the canon.

Throughout the history of redemption, God spoke "at many times and in many ways," but "in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:3). God has spoken to us *finally* in the person of Jesus Christ and his work of redemption and in the proclamation and explanation of this redemptive

2. STATEMENT OF FAITH, "THE ATTRIBUTES OF SCRIPTURE."

3. A GOOD OVERVIEW OF CHURCH HISTORY'S AFFIRMATION OF THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE IS CONTAINED IN *HISTORICAL THEOLOGY* BY GREGG ALLISON, 142-161.

work in the New Testament.

Jesus Christ is the only Mediator between God and men. Whereas throughout the Old Testament, believers drew near to God through the temporary provision of animal sacrifice, now we draw near through “the new and living way” opened up by his sacrificial death on our behalf (Heb. 10:19). Wonderfully, we fear no more condemnation, even in the presence of the holy God. The work of redemption is final and complete.

However, Jesus did not say everything that needed to be said before he ascended. He had more to say (John 16:12). So, after Jesus completed the work of redemption, the Holy Spirit inspired the authors of the New Testament to write all that needed to be written to explain and apply his redemptive work. “In this dispensation, the Holy Spirit has no other task than to apply the work of Christ and similarly to explain the word of Christ.”⁴

We have 66 books in our Bible. But, there were other prophecies (Num. 21:14; Josh. 10:13), other historical writings (1 Chr. 29:29), other stories about Jesus (John 20:30), and other apostolic writings (1 Cor. 5:9; Col. 4:16) that were not preserved for us.⁵ So, how do we know that we have all the books we need? How do we know that we have the entire canon?

From early in its history, the church has agreed upon and received these 66 books as authoritative. Yet, our confidence does not rest in the decisions of men but the inspirational and providential work of God. Over and through the process of the church receiving and selecting the 66 books of the Bible, God was at work. God brought these specific books into existence and guided the church to receive them.

As Bavinck explains,

The place and time at which they were first recognized as authoritative cannot be indicated. The canonicity of the Bible books is rooted in their existence. They have authority of themselves, by their own right, because they exist. It is the Spirit of the Lord who guided the authors in writing them and the church in acknowledging them.⁶

4. HERMAN BAVINCK, *REFORMED DOGMATICS VOL. 1* (ADA, MI: BAKER ACADEMIC, 2003), 491. ALSO QUOTED IN *THY WORD IS TRUTH*, 653.

5. SEE RICHARD B. GAFFIN JR., “THE NEW TESTAMENT AS CANON,” QUOTED IN *THY WORD IS TRUTH*, 1163–1176.

6. HERMAN BAVINCK, *REFORMED DOGMATICS VOL. 1* (ADA, MI: BAKER ACADEMIC, 2003), 400.

Calvin likewise affirms: “These [books] which the Lord judged to be necessary for his church have been selected by his providence for everlasting remembrance.”⁷ Through inspiration and providential preservation of the Scriptures, God himself has ensured that his people would possess his authoritative and sufficient Word.

The Reality of Scripture’s Sufficiency

The reality of Scripture’s sufficiency is that we have in the pages of the Scriptures all that we need for life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:4). With Scripture alone and the illuminating work of the Spirit, the believer is “complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Our *Statement of Faith* beautifully proclaims:

*We have in the
pages of the
Scriptures all that
we need for life
and godliness.*

“The Word of God is therefore necessary and wholly sufficient for knowing the Father’s love in Christ, experiencing his glorious plan of redemption, and being instructed in the way of fruitful and godly living. . . . Scripture alone is our supreme and final authority and the rule of faith and life.”⁸

Stated positively, Scripture is completely sufficient for us to receive salvation and live godly lives. It is enough. It includes everything we need to know. But, also, negatively, Scripture alone is our final authority for what is right and what pleases God, in all questions and controversies.

As the *Westminster Confession of Faith* says:

“The Old Testament in Hebrew . . . and the New Testament in Greek . . . being immediately inspired by God, and, by His singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic; so as, in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them.”⁹

7. JOHN CALVIN, QUOTED IN *THY WORD IS TRUTH*, 1175.

8. *STATEMENT OF FAITH*, “THE ATTRIBUTES OF SCRIPTURE.”

9. WCF, CHAPTER 1, SECTION VIII.

The Present Challenges to Scripture's Sufficiency

Traditionally, Protestants have affirmed four primary attributes of Scripture: sufficiency, authority, perspicuity (or clarity), and necessity. However, Kevin DeYoung observes,

Of the four attributes of Scripture, [sufficiency] may be the one evangelicals forget first. If authority is the liberal problem, clarity the post-modern problem, and necessity the problem for atheists and agnostics, then sufficiency is the attribute most quickly doubted by rank-and-file churchgoing Christians.¹⁰

The sufficiency of Scripture is the attribute we forget *first*.

We often articulate the challenges to Scripture's sufficiency as being "out there"—and outside the church. And those challenges are certainly present in the culture's rapidly changing positions on sexuality, the redefinition of justice, the continued attempts to undermine Scripture's authority, and so on.

The most significant challenge to Scripture's sufficiency is not outside the church but within our hearts.

But, perhaps the most significant challenge to Scripture's sufficiency is not outside the church but within our hearts. It is the reach for *more* than what God has said.

The culturally-curated impulse is to reach for some word or vision or plan with more perceived relevance and acceptance. It is the tendency to be swayed more by public opinion than by the revealed will of God. It is the wait for an experiential sense of Scripture's truth before obeying Scripture's command.

To lay hold of Scripture's sufficiency is to recognize that God in his wisdom has already provided precisely what we need to know him, delight in him, and live for him. He's given us the truth that informs our knowledge of him, ourselves, and our world. He's provided wisdom to guide us in our

10. KEVIN DEYOUNG, *TAKING GOD AT HIS WORD* (WHEATON, IL: CROSSWAY, 2014), 45.

lives, relationships, and decisions. He's made promises that sustain us in the difficulties of life in a fallen world. And in the person and work of Jesus, he's given us assurance of forgiveness, security in his love, and confidence that, in Christ, all things are working for our good and his glory.

What more can God say than what he has already told us? The Lord has spoken, and his Word is sufficient. May God help us not to forget Scripture's sufficiency and to stand on what he has said.

WALT ALEXANDER

Walt Alexander serves as senior pastor at [Trinity Grace Church](#) (Athens, TN).

SUSTAINED BY THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

BILL PATTON

*"There is only one true and living God, who is infinite in
being, power, and perfections."
(The Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith, "The Triune God")*

I know what it's like to wake up in the morning and wish the day was over. As I suppose is the case with all of us, I have found myself deeply perplexed and depressed at times. Life took some unexpected, unhappy turns—and to say that I was "down" during those seasons would be an understatement.

God, in His faithfulness, often met me in those moments, ministering profound comfort and help in my time of need. As I look back now, what is a little surprising to me is that God has so frequently carried out this reviving work in my soul through the reading of books, especially old books.

Two books, in particular, have sustained me. The first is entitled *The Existence and Attributes of God* by Steven Charnock, first published in 1682. Charnock's 1,100-page study of the existence of God, the eternity of God, the omnipresence of God, the knowledge of God, the power of God, the

holiness of God, the goodness of God, the patience of God, etc. is still my go-to resource when I become depressed. "Okay, brother Charnock...tell me again who God is."

My second go-to book is *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* by Jeremiah Burroughs. First published in 1648, it applies the doctrines of God's sovereignty and God's wisdom to Christian living with the goal of learning peaceful, quiet contentment.

So, I think it's accurate to say that few things have sustained me or brought greater comfort to my soul than the doctrine of God and his infinite attributes.

Spurgeon once said to his congregation:

*Here are words
which bring
comfort, hope, and
peace.*

"Would you lose your sorrow?
Would you drown your cares? Then
go, plunge yourself in the Godhead's
deepest sea; be lost in his immensi-
ty; and you shall come forth as from
a couch of rest, refreshed and invig-
orated. I know nothing which can so
comfort the soul; so calm the swelling
billows of sorrow and grief; so speak
peace to the winds of trial, as a devout

musing upon the subject of the Godhead."¹

Infinite in Being, Power, and Perfections

The doctrine of God in our *Statement of Faith* opens with these words: "*There is only one true and living God, who is infinite in being, power, and perfections.*" Every day our culture bombards us with a harsh, discordant cacophony of falsehood. And here, like a loud gavel in a chaotic courtroom, are words which silence the disorderly hubbub; words which blow away the polluted clouds of vain speculation; words which bring comfort, hope, and peace to all who have ears to hear them. *There is one true and living God!*

Those words dispel popular cultural notions that there is no God, or that

1. J.I. PACKER, *KNOWING GOD* (WESTMONT, IL: IVP, 1973), 14.

there are many gods, or that everything is somehow divine. God exists. There is but one God. He is the true and living God. And he possesses unique, infinite attributes which make him utterly unlike any of his creatures.

We humans tend to imagine that the conditions, bounds, and limits of our finite existence apply to God. But they do not. He is an infinite being—he has always existed, and he always will. Furthermore, God is not only infinite in being; he is infinite in *all* His perfections—which means there are no limits to any of his attributes; he is infinite in them all.

Hence God is boundless in power. He is the Almighty, omnipotent One. He can do anything and everything that he, in his wisdom and goodness, wills to do. Jeremiah, overwhelmed at the thought of God's infinite power, overflowed with worship:

*"Ah Lord God
behold thou hast made the heaven and the earth
by thy great power and outstretched arm...
and there is nothing too hard for thee..."*
(Jer. 32:17, KJV)

Infinite Goodness

God's infinite power alone can be a frightening thought: *What is this infinitely powerful God like? What might he do?* But God is not only infinitely powerful; he is also infinitely good. His goodness includes his love, his kindness, his mercy, his faithfulness, his compassion, and his generosity. How good is God? The depths of his goodness cannot be measured! We say that his love is as vast as the ocean, as deep as the sea, as high as the mountain. But those comparisons fall woefully short of the sheer vastness of God's goodness most overwhelmingly displayed at the cross of Christ.

Remembering that his kind and compassionate love towards his own will infinitely endure enables us to confess with David: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." (Ps. 23:6)

Infinite Holiness

God is also infinite holiness. When God calls himself "holy," it means that he is set apart, utterly distinct from his creation. It also means that he, and

everything which flows from him, are without moral blemish. His every thought, attitude, word, and deed are pure light, without taint or stain of moral darkness.

We can't get through a day—an hour—without moral imperfections. But God has always been, now is, and ever will be infinite moral perfection. That glorious holiness beautifies all his other attributes, including those that often appear unlovely or menacing in his creatures. So God's might is not volatile; it is a holy might; his mercy is not capricious, it is holy mercy; his justice is not corruptible, it is morally perfect. What a sublime mix of wonder and fear, comfort and joy, we begin to know when we consider God's infinite holiness!

Infinite Wisdom

Just as infinite holiness pervades all God's attributes, so does infinite wisdom. "Wisdom in scripture means choosing the best and noblest end at which to aim, along with the most appropriate and effective means to it."²

Every day we encounter situations and circumstances beyond our control that perplex us, confuse us, or frighten us. We are often left wondering, "What is happening? Where is this going?" If God's sovereign choices concerning me and my loved ones emerge not only from infinite moral goodness but are also guided by infinite wisdom, then I can rest and be at peace amid personal perplexity. Though I may not understand, God has chosen the most appropriate and effective means to achieve his good and holy purposes concerning me. So, I can trust that wisdom and his fatherly love. And you can too.

And So Much More

God is not just infinitely powerful, good, holy, and wise "out there" somewhere. He is all of these things with me. Because God is not bound by spatial location, wherever we are, we can always say to him, "No matter where I go, you are there; your hand shall lead me, your right hand shall hold me" (See Ps. 139:7-10).

Because he is the Triune God—an infinite fountain of being—we can say

2. J.I. PACKER, *CONCISE THEOLOGY* (WHEATON, IL: TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC., 1993), 48.

to him, "You are never distant, aloof, or disinterested in your creation; you are an unceasing river of interpersonal engagement, relationship, and love towards me."

Because He is exhaustively sovereign, ordaining all that exists and all that occurs in his creation, we can say to him, "I know you will accomplish your infinitely good and wise purposes concerning me—you have spoken and you will surely bring it to pass" (See Isa. 46:9-11).

So when those mornings come when you wish the day were over, let me encourage you to look beyond your day to the God who orders your days. Look beyond yourself to the God who made you, saved you, and sustains you. One of the best ways I know to do this is to study the doctrine of God. Study his infinite perfections and allow the doctrine of God to move you towards a deeper peace, a sweeter rest, and a more settled trust—perhaps especially if you're distressed and your soul is downcast.

Follow Spurgeon's wise advise and plunge yourself in the Godhead's deepest sea. There you will find strength, refreshment, and comfort all the days of your life.

BILL PATTON

Bill Patton is an elder at [Covenant Fellowship Church](#) (Glen Mills, PA).

CHOSEN BY GRACE: THE GLORIOUS MYSTERY OF ELECTION

C.J. MAHANEY

"God in his great love, before the foundation of the world, chose those whom he would save in Christ Jesus. God's election is entirely gracious and not at all conditioned upon foreseen faith, obedience, perseverance, or any merit in those whom God has chosen."

(The Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith, "God's Sovereign Purposes")

The first chapter of John Stott's book *Why I Am A Christian* is entitled "The Hound of Heaven." Stott explains that the phrase was first used by the English poet Francis Thompson to describe God's gracious and relentless pursuit of sinners. Though Thompson had fled from God through opioid addiction and the pursuit of worldly pleasure, the grace of God sought him out and rescued him.

Stott similarly explains his conversion: "Why I am a Christian is due ultimately neither to the influence of my parents and teachers, nor to my own personal decision for Christ, but to 'the Hound of Heaven.' That is, it is due to Jesus Christ himself, who pursued me relentlessly even when I was running away from him in order to go my own way. And if it were not for the gracious pursuit of the Hound of Heaven I would today be on the scrapheap

of wasted and discarded lives."¹

What is your understanding of your conversion experience? Who pursued whom? Did God come looking for you? Or does it seem that, in essence, you were pursuing God? What stands out the most to you: God's initiative and intervention or your repentance and faith?

These are not academic questions. The Christian who misunderstands or misinterprets the underlying cause of his or her conversion can be vulnerable to legalism, pride, self-reliance, ingratitude, condemnation, and lack of assurance. But when we rightly understand the nature of our conversion— that is, when we clearly grasp the role of God's sovereign grace in election—we position ourselves to enjoy, in an ongoing way, the wonderfully life-transforming benefits that are available only through the gospel.

*We must all
acknowledge that we
are in way over our
heads.*

Out of Our Depth

Election, of course, is a doctrine issuing from the deep end of the theological pool. Yet, as soon as we encounter it, we must all acknowledge that we are in way over our heads. This is a place of mystery, a place that spawns a hundred questions, all of them variations on a single question: "How do I reconcile divine sovereignty with human responsibility?"

It is good to acknowledge that just as we cannot fully understand God, so we cannot fully understand doctrines about God and his ways. Mystery remains. Indeed, God has announced the following non-negotiable arrangement: "The secret things belong to the Lord and the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever" (Deut. 29:29).

How comfortable are you with the secret things of God?...with the difficult to understand?...the paradox?...the apparent contradiction? Are you at peace in the deep end of the pool? In Scripture, God has asserted both divine sovereignty and human responsibility without seeking to harmonize them

1. JOHN STOTT, *WHY I AM A CHRISTIAN* (DOWNERS GROVE, IL: INTERVARSITY PRESS, 2003), 14-15.

completely. But they are certainly harmonized in his infinite wisdom, and that should be enough for us.

John Calvin offers wise counsel on this matter:

The subject of predestination, which in itself is attended by considerable difficulty, is rendered very perplexed, and hence perilous, by human curiosity, which cannot be restrained from wandering into forbidden paths ... Those secrets of His will which he has seen fit to manifest are revealed in his Word—revealed in so far as he knew to be conducive to our interest and welfare... Let it, therefore, be our first principle that to desire any other knowledge of predestination than that which is expounded by the Word of God, is no less infatuated than to walk where there is no path, or to seek light in darkness.... The best rule of sobriety is, not only in learning to follow wherever God leads, but also when he makes an end of teaching to cease wishing to be wise.²

I believe that Christian maturity includes an increasing comfort with divine mystery and a growing trust in God so that we can say with David, "O Lord, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great or too marvelous for me" (Ps. 131:1).

As one grows in Christ, there won't be less mystery. But there ought to be more humility, that we may be more at rest in the presence of divine mystery. May it be great enough and marvelous enough for us to know that the doctrine of election is sound and reliable, representing the clear teaching of Scripture.

The Glorious Mystery

Ephesians 1:4 is a definitive text for gaining a biblical understanding of one's salvation. Here, despite the lingering presence of mystery, is clarity that the human mind can grasp firmly. This verse explains what was really taking place at that moment of conversion: the outworking of a divine choice made before the world began.

The verse tells us that our transition from death to life, from sinner to saint, from an object of wrath to an object of mercy, was exclusively and entirely

2. QUOTED IN J.I. PACKER, *GOD'S WORDS* (DOWNERS GROVE, IL, INTERVARSITY, 1981), 158.

the result of sovereign grace. Does your first impression of your conversion suggest otherwise? If so, let that impression be adjusted by truth:

He chose us in him before the foundation of the world.

In this verse, Paul takes us behind the scenes. He turns our attention away from our limited, personal experience and toward the Sovereign One, reigning in eternity past. Inspired by the Spirit, Paul wants absolute clarity on this point: salvation flows from divine election. Every conversion, in every era, in every land, has come about solely by God's sovereign grace.

In the context of Ephesians 1, Paul is celebrating the spiritual blessings we have in Christ: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing." Paul then spins out a dizzying array of blessings, beginning with the fact that "He chose us" (v. 4). The effect of that initial blessing is later echoed several more times in the passage—in words such as "predestined," "adoption," "redemption," and "forgiveness"—as Paul explores the wonders of our unmerited salvation.

*Salvation flows
from divine
election.*

We learn from this passage of Scripture that divine choice precedes human response. In light of my sinfulness, pervasive depravity, and wicked hostility to God, I must concur with Charles Spurgeon that this is precisely what happened in my case.

I believe the doctrine of election because I am quite certain that, if God had not chosen me, I should never have chosen him; and I am sure he chose me before I was born, or else he never would have chosen me afterwards; and he must have elected me for reasons unknown to me, for I never could find any reason in myself why he should have looked upon me with special love.³

Do you agree? Does your spirit rise in affirmation? Do you see that God chose you, and not vice versa? And do you see that he chose you not because of who

3. CHARLES SPURGEON QUOTED IN *TABLE TALK* (SEPTEMBER 8, 1994).

you were, or are, or will yet become, but simply out of His abundant mercy?

Running in the Opposite Direction

Mark Webb tells a story that brilliantly addresses a common misunderstanding regarding the nature of election. It begins with him teaching a class.

After giving a brief survey of these doctrines of sovereign grace, I asked for questions from the class. One lady, in particular, was quite troubled. She said, "This is the most awful thing I've ever heard! You make it sound as if God is intentionally turning away men who would be saved, receiving only the elect." I answered her in this vein. "You misunderstand the situation. You're visualizing that God is standing at the door of heaven, and men are thronging to get in the door, and God is saying to various ones, 'Yes, you may come, but not you, or you, or you...!' The situation is hardly this. Rather, God stands at the door of heaven with his arms outstretched, inviting all to come. Yet all men, without exception, are running in the opposite direction towards hell as hard as they can go. So God, in election, graciously reaches out and stops this one, and that one, and this one over here, and that one over there, and effectually draws them to himself by changing their hearts, making them willing to come. Election keeps no one out of heaven who would otherwise have been there, but it keeps a whole multitude of sinners out of hell who otherwise would have been there. Were it not for election, heaven would be an empty place, and hell would be bursting at the seams." That kind of response, grounded as I believe that it is in scriptural truth, does put a different complexion on things, doesn't it?

If you perish in hell, blame yourself, as it is entirely your fault. But if you should make it to heaven, credit God, for that is entirely his work! To him alone belong all praise and glory, for salvation is all of grace from start to finish!"⁴

Do you realize that God stopped you in your willful, headlong rush toward the fires of hell? Scripture speaks of us, in our unregenerate condition, as enemies of God, denoting an active hatred and hostility (Col. 1:21; Rom. 5:10; Phil. 3:18-19). Yet before Genesis 1:1, this God whom you hated determined to save you. And in time, through the proclamation of the gospel, he

4. MARK WEBB, "WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE" (*REFORMATION AND REVIVAL JOURNAL*, VOL. 3, NO. 1, WINTER 1994), 53-54.

called you by name, stopping you in your eager flight. Why did he do that? Certainly not because there was anything lovable in you. This is the mystery of his mercy. Because he had chosen you in Christ, he drew you to Christ.

Do you not find that astonishing? The more you are aware of God's divine initiative and your depravity, the more you will be amazed by grace. Let's remember: You and I were dead in our sins (Eph. 2:1; Col. 2:13). God placed that phrase in the Bible intentionally. We were not weakened. We were not injured. We were not sickly or languishing. But, in relation to God and salvation, we were dead. Flatlined. Gone. A bunch of corpses.

At the same time, we were very much alive with respect to sin and self. We loved darkness, and that love made us enemies of God and hostile to him. We hated him. Please, don't flatter yourself by thinking otherwise. Let the plain teaching of Scripture enlighten your understanding. You were not seeking God. You did not discover God. You did not find God. (He was not hiding.) Nor were you neutral toward God. On the contrary, you were actively and arrogantly hostile and opposed—you hated God as your enemy. You may well have been drawn to some caricature of God. You may have been pursuing a counterfeit religious experience involving a man-pleasing deity crafted out of vain hopes and sinful imagination. But the true and living God—the sovereign, self-sustaining, pre-existent one—him, you despised. It was directly away from him, away from the uncompromising standard of his perfect holiness, that you were running and running hard.

How could a holy God choose sinners such as us? Scripture provides the answer to this all-important question. He chose us "in him." That is, in the Savior, who in the first 14 verses of Ephesians is referenced no less than 15 times. He is the means by which God's choice to save is achieved. Sovereign grace is in him. I am chosen in Christ and solely because of Christ. I am not chosen apart from Christ or because of anything within me. Election, redemption, adoption, and forgiveness of sins are in him, and none of these can exist apart from him. He was the spotless lamb of God, foreknown before the foundation of the world as our redeemer.

Moved to a Worthy Response

"When [Paul] introduces [election] into his teaching," writes J.I. Packer, "it is for one end only—to help Christians see how great is the grace that

has saved them, and to move them to a worthy response in worship and life."⁵ Indeed, to hold to a biblical understanding of election is to live a life of "worthy response." To learn that we were chosen before time enables us to live for God, in time, with joy, passion, and clarity of purpose that is rooted beyond time.

In my experience, a clear and thorough understanding of God's grace in election promotes, at a minimum, humility before God, assurance from God, gratefulness to God, and a pervasive sense of mission for the glory of God. By God's grace, these "worthy responses" in large measure have characterized the churches of Sovereign Grace thus far. It is my hope that they continue to do so, and in increasing measure, that God may be increasingly glorified.

Humility before God

*Election leaves
no room for self-
congratulation, for it
precludes all human
contribution.*

In 1 Corinthians 1:26-29, Paul references election four times and then ties the doctrine of election to humility, "so that no human being might boast" (v. 29). "God intentionally designed salvation so that no man could boast of it," writes Mark Webb. "He didn't merely arrange it so that boasting would be discouraged or kept to a minimum—He planned it so that boasting would be absolutely excluded. Election does precisely that."⁶

Election leaves no room for self-congratulation, for it precludes all human contribution. If your repentance had contributed to your eternal salvation, if it had helped in any way to bring about your resurrection from spiritual death into eternal life, if it had somehow persuaded God to change his mind about your eternal destiny, well that would be a pretty neat trick. I'd be very impressed, and you would have something to boast about before God and man. But, as Philip Ryken points out, "Repentance is not a special method for saving ourselves; it is a way of admitting that we cannot save ourselves at all. It is a way of throwing ourselves on the mercy of God and begging

5. J.I. PACKER, *GOD'S WORDS* (ADA, MI: BAKER ACADEMIC, 1998), 157.

6. MARK WEBB, "WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?" (*REFORMATION AND REVIVAL JOURNAL*, VOL. 3, NO. 1, WINTER 1994), 52.

the Saviour to save us."⁷

One reason I am so thankful to God that we have the name Sovereign Grace Churches is that this name should help to restrain pride and promote humility. "Sovereign grace," of course, encompasses far more than election. It speaks of all God's gracious attributes and acts, as they relate to all of life, for all things are under the sovereign, gracious, attentive care of God. Nothing that man does for God is ever about human achievement. It is about God's mercy, kindness, and gracious enabling. "What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" (1 Cor. 4:7). A right understanding of grace will always promote humility. So I have always viewed this name as a gift, a catalyst to humility, effective today, but also sent on ahead to some future generation I will not see.

Assurance from God

I meet far too many people who seem unsure or unaware of God's love for them personally. They know God loves other Christians. They know God loves their pastor. They know God loves the members of their church. But they are far less certain that the Creator loves the specific individual bearing their name, their fingerprints, their unique DNA.

To have even a minimal understanding of election is to experience the love of God on a personal level. Note how Paul, when exploring the intricacies of the doctrine of justification beginning at Galatians 2:15, could not help but move very quickly into what this meant for him personally: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (v.20).

May the phrase by which our denomination is known promote a continual, deepening assurance of God's unfailing, timeless love. That divine love began in eternity past. It is immune to the effects of this present age. It stands outside of time and creation and will continue forever.

Gratefulness to God

Ephesians 1:3-14 is an uninterrupted outburst of praise. That's the effect of

7. PHILIP RYKEN, *THE MESSAGE OF SALVATION* (DOWNERS GROVE, IL: INTERVARSITY, 2001), 60.

understanding the sovereign grace of election. Bruce Milne writes of this passage: "Paul is not standing at his desk engaged in dialectical argumentation; rather he is on his knees, lost in adoring worship."⁸ The doctrine of election is not meant to be a point of theological disputation. It is a call to worship.

My prayer and exhortation are that the name of our family of churches serve as a continual reminder of God's gracious initiative toward his people and thus as a call to worship. May our personal lives and churches be characterized by the distinct absence of complaining and the distinct presence of passionate, grateful praise and worship to God.

May it never be that these outward expressions to God become superficial or merely habitual. Before the foundation of the world, he chose me

in Christ. Therefore, even to a basic understanding of the doctrine of election, the only appropriate response is passionate gratefulness—praise and worship all the days of my life until my dying breath.

*The doctrine of
election is a call to
worship.*

Mission for the Glory of God

Before creation, God was doing some choosing. He's been busy in eternity past, and he's got saving work to do

in the present. And he does that work when his people proclaim the good news. The churches of Sovereign Grace are called by God to evangelism and church-planting, both locally and among the nations.

In this world, we live amongst men, women, and children who have not experienced salvation. Yet, because of the doctrine of election, we know that the eventual salvation of specific ones among them is absolutely certain. We do not—indeed, we can not—know in advance who these individuals are. But we know they are there, in every tribe and tongue and nation. And we know that, for each one chosen before time, there will be that moment in time when a single presentation of the gospel is used by God to bring about salvation.

8. BRUCE MILNE, *KNOW THE TRUTH, THIRD EDITION* (DOWNERS GROVE, IL: INTERVARSITY PRESS, 2009), 253.

Knowing that our salvation was fundamentally accomplished by God rather than ourselves fuels our confidence and builds our faith to see others regenerated. We go out into the world full of faith, knowing that the gospel is the power of God and that the triumph of the gospel was assured before time began.

Far from undermining evangelism and church planting, a proper understanding of the doctrine of election invigorates both these activities and assures us of their ultimate success. How good it is to know that the gospel of the crucified and risen Savior does not return void. Our God has "a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10). By grace, this plan of the Sovereign One will indeed be fulfilled. Whatever exceedingly small role our churches may play in that fulfillment, sovereign grace has surely been our history. Sovereign grace will be our future.

A version of this article first appeared in the Sovereign Grace Perspectives series, "Sovereign Grace and the Glorious Mystery of Election," 2004.

C.J. MAHANEY

C.J. Mahaney is senior pastor of [Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville](#) (Louisville, KY).

THE ENDURING CENTRALITY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

WARREN BOETTCHER

"As an expression of Christ's universal church, the local church is the focal point of God's plan to mature his people and save sinners."

(The Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith, "The Church of Christ")

1985 proved to be a pivotal year in my life as a Christian. It was my first visit to Covenant Fellowship Church—a Sovereign Grace Church near Philadelphia, PA—and my first foray into a "charismatic" church (We now prefer the "continuationist" designation).

Coming from a Presbyterian background, this came as quite a culture shock: singing for 40 minutes with people raising their hands, sharing "prophetic words" during the singing, hour-long messages, and services that were two hours or more. However, sound doctrine, Gospel-centered preaching, and practical application kept me intrigued. This was worth further investigation.

It was there that I also learned of the centrality of the local church to the purposes of God. I had never seen church commitment like I saw in those early days. Some 36 years later, our messages have become a bit more con-

cise, our services not quite so long, and God's Word is featured even more prominently in all we do. However, the intrigue that captured me in 1985 has turned into biblically-informed convictions, personally precious and deeply held.

An Unchanging Commitment to the Church

The early days of my journey saw a family of churches identified as People of Destiny International. The name seemed like a good idea in the early 1980s, even though we started with only a few churches, and they were all located in the U.S. (Vision often surpasses reality!)

We later changed our name to Sovereign Grace Ministries to stress God's initiating, gracious activity over anything we do. Then, with establishing a new polity, we became "Sovereign Grace Churches." This final change is most appropriate since, throughout our history, our commitment to the church and church planting has never wavered. While popular methods and "hot" new trends come and go, this enduring vision continues with the same passion because of its firm grounding in Scripture.

*This enduring
vision continues
with the same
passion.*

As I reflect on our history, I marvel at the clarity God gave our young leaders at the beginning on truths we still hold precious. For example, we've always believed that Christ loves the church and gave himself up for her (Eph. 5:25) and that the church is a cosmic display of the wisdom of God (Eph. 3:10). God wants Christians to be like living stones, built up as a spiritual house (1 Pet. 2:5), sharing his devotion to the church.

This vision led me to a career change from teaching in a Christian school (a job I loved) to go on staff at Covenant Fellowship. This led to an eventual church plant in South Jersey in 1993. Since that time, we've had the privilege of planting two more local churches that are affecting their areas with the gospel—we have seen people come to know the salvation that is in Christ and continue to be transformed by the grace of God in Christian community. In addition, we have seen over the decades the enduring centrality of the local church to the purposes of God.

One of the striking features of Sovereign Grace Churches' commitment to the priority of the local church is how much the leadership of SGC and all of "SG central" (the men and women who work for SG) have served the local church rather than have the local churches serve the central leadership. It was, and always has been, my experience that we received far more than we gave. This was generously expressed in financial investment, conferences designed to strengthen our churches, relational connections, pastoral counsel, and personal care. The health and biblical success of the local church marked and still marks the leadership culture of our family of churches.

Challenges to the Priority of the Local Church

However, keeping this priority and centrality is not without its challenges. It seems to me that even now, there are additional challenges to this vision. I see them in four primary areas.

First, the challenge of the new. In my early days, everyone seemed on the same page regarding the priority of the church—the vision was compelling, and the commitment was infectious. However, this centrality of the church was a new concept to me and had all the excitement of something new.

While I grew up never missing church, even when on vacation (so I could get another perfect attendance pin to wear), I didn't understand the centrality of the church to the mission of God to mature his people and reach others with the gospel. I grew up in more of a parachurch culture. The church was something believers should go to, but parachurch ministries made a difference in the world. My own experience with Christian discipleship was more driven by the Christian school I attended than my local church. Coming to Covenant Fellowship opened my eyes to see something I hadn't seen before: God's plan for the church.

However, to a culture obsessed with novelty and innovation, the priority of the local church seems ancient, if not altogether irrelevant. And for those who have labored in Sovereign Grace for decades, the idea of prioritizing the church doesn't have all the excitement of something new. It seems to me that all of us who love the local church and see its priority are called to help people not chase the new but develop deep convictions for what God has ordained (the local church) and what is biblical. Biblical conviction about the glory of the local church in God's plans will be far more fruitful than reminiscing about the "good old days."

Second, the challenge of distraction. Cultural issues, political issues, and trends can all seem so big, important, and time-consuming. They can exhaust our mental focus, time, and emotional energy. We can fall into thinking that the nation's future is so much bigger and more urgent than the message of the gospel.

Even noble endeavors can become ignoble if they call us away from biblical priorities. Cultural issues are not the only distraction. Kids' schedules, for example, can easily drive family priorities more than biblical priorities. There are more opportunities for kids' activities than ever before, and it takes discernment and courage for parents to navigate. Gifting and opportunity should not mean an automatic "yes" if they compete with higher spiritual priorities. Parents need to not only believe in the priority of the local church—they need to show the beauty of that priority in their lives.

Third, the challenge of crisis. The coronavirus pandemic presented a massive challenge to the local church. Many churches were unable to meet in person for months. Livestream became the new normal. Even regathering brought polarizing and sometimes divisive issues—wear masks or don't wear masks, vaccinate or don't vaccinate, continue to Livestream or stop making the virtual option available.

While we may never come to a consensus on all those issues, one thing we know—the church is called to meet personally and regularly. There is simply no other biblical pattern. While this particular crisis has been unique in our lifetime, crisis is not unique in church history, and this certainly won't be the last crisis we face. May the Spirit of God help us to learn through this one.

Finally, the challenge of disappointment. In our early days of partnering together, everything seemed great. People were getting saved, the church was growing, everyone was committed, and we had broad favor from others. However, we were a young movement. With growth and time, harsh realities replace some of the romance of zealous youthfulness. Over time, church life brings new realities and new challenges, revealing weakness, limitations, and mistakes, even in our leaders.

These inherent issues can lead to disappointment, and disappointment can lead to criticalness, distance, and even disillusionment. Pastorally, this requires honest humility and sincere contrition. Congregationally, this requires biblical maturity that neither overvalues nor undervalues pastors. While

respecting pastors, mature congregations also see their pastors as fellow saints—called to serve God's people, yes, but also sheep who are flawed and needy like the rest of us.

Recognition of this and the desperate need for grace we all have will protect and strengthen our commitment to the church, even when inevitable disappointment occurs. We'll have big-hearted love for one another and practice biblically-informed loyalty in our churches. This will bring glory to the Savior, not self-congratulation to us for the strength and health of our churches. "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!" (Ps. 115:1)

"I Will Build My Church"

*Our confidence
that the church will
endure comes from
God's Word and
his Spirit.*

While these challenges are not small, our confidence that the church will endure comes from God's Word and his Spirit. "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." These words spoken by Jesus in Matthew 16:18 were true then and remain true today.

When we consider church history, we see the church endure persecution, pandemics, famine, war, internal struggles, abuse of power, cultural attack, division, heresy, apostasy, and more. When we consider our history, we don't see all the same challenges, but we do experience the same faithfulness of God and his power.

As our *Statement of Faith* says, "Even true churches are imperfect: they often contain a mixture of unbelievers hidden among the true flock and are vulnerable to theological error and moral failure. Yet Christ is unwavering in his commitment to build his church and will surely bring it to maturity."

The Lord is with us! He is unwavering in his commitment! The church will endure because Christ created it and ordained it to achieve his purposes. The unstoppable gospel will continue to go out from the church Christ

purchased with His blood and for his glory.

I am so grateful for these great and precious promises. And I remain grateful for the joy of experiencing them with the brothers and sisters in our dear family of churches.

WARREN BOETTCHER

Warren Boettcher is senior pastor at [Sovereign Grace Church](#) (Marlton, NJ).

A SPIRIT-FILLED PEOPLE

JOSELO MERCADO

"The filling of the Spirit brings to God's people a deeper knowledge of Christ, an increased desire for holiness, a stronger commitment to unity and love, a greater fruitfulness in ministry, and a deeper gratitude for our salvation."

(The Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith, "The Empowering Ministry of the Spirit")

Over the past 18 months, the term "misinformation" has grown in popularity. This term has been applied to political and social issues to form certain societal narratives. However, no matter how we view the cultural issues, it is important that, as believers, we are not misinformed about the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and what the effect of being filled with the Spirit should be.

The Apostle Paul desired that the Corinthian church not proceed based on ignorance regarding the use of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:1). So, likewise, we can be sure that God does not want us to be ignorant about the ministry of the Holy Spirit as he fills us.

Unfortunately, misinformation abounds regarding the work of the Spirit. In recent decades, extreme views, unbiblical emphases, and bizarre practices regarding the Spirit and his gifts have affected many Christians.

I thank God that Sovereign Grace's *Statement of Faith* presents the person of the Holy Spirit with such clarity and certainty. It faithfully presents the broad work of the third person of the Trinity, and it shows us the effect that being filled with the Spirit should have on believers.

"The filling of the Spirit brings to God's people a deeper knowledge of Christ, an increased desire for holiness, a stronger commitment to unity and love, a greater fruitfulness in ministry, and a deeper gratitude for our salvation." (*Statement of Faith*, "The Empowering Ministry of the Spirit") These five fruits provide a powerful incentive to seek the Spirit's filling and eagerly invite his work among us.

"A deeper knowledge of Christ"

The main role of the Holy Spirit is to show us Christ. Jesus says that when the Spirit comes, "he will bear witness about me" (John 15:26) and "He will glorify me" (John 16:14).

*The main role of
the Holy Spirit is to
show us Christ.*

God's glorious plan of redemption is initiated by the Father, executed by the Son, and revealed by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's great work is that we discover the crucified and resurrected Son of God as Savior of the world. We are strengthened with power through the Spirit to know and experience the love Christ has for us (Eph. 3:16-19).

If we believe that all the Scriptures are about Christ (Luke 24:44-47; Rom. 1:1-3) and that the human authors of Scripture were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21), then a large part of the ministry of the Spirit must be to show us Christ. Jesus declared himself to be the truth and taught that the Holy Spirit would be sent to lead people into the truth or the knowledge of himself.

There is nothing more important that the Holy Spirit can do. We can affirm with certainty that all the other functions and activities of the Holy Spirit are

subordinated to deepening our knowledge of Christ. I would not want to reduce the ministry of the Holy Spirit exclusively to that of a beacon pointing to Christ since the Holy Spirit performs many other functions in addition to revealing Christ. But this is his greatest work. An alleged ministry of the Holy Spirit that does not exalt Christ and reveal him to be glorious is not a work of the Spirit.

"An increased desire for holiness"

When the Spirit fills us, we are given a greater passion for spiritual growth. He is not an impersonal force that exists to give us pleasant mystical experiences. Instead, he is a personal and divine protagonist in the work of redemption, which includes our sanctification. The goal of the Spirit's filling is not primarily emotional; it is transformational.

By the Spirit, we see Christ and are changed into His image (2 Cor. 3:18), and by the Spirit, we put to death the deeds of the body (Rom. 8:13). His fullness in our lives is seen in our love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23).

The power of the Holy Spirit that raised Christ from the grave is the immense power that raised us from our spiritual death. It is incredible to think that in order to get out of our state of spiritual death, we need the same power that raised Christ from the dead. This supernatural power is not merely a thing of the past because the Giver of that power now dwells in us.

Wherever there is a desire for increased holiness in our lives or a grace-tinged sorrow that we are not further along, we can be sure it is the Spirit's work. He gives us the desire for holiness, giving us the power to be changed.

"A stronger commitment to unity and love"

The book of Acts shows the unstoppable gospel of Christ being preached and saving multitudes of people throughout the Roman Empire through the work of the Holy Spirit. By saving people of different nationalities, backgrounds, and social positions, the Holy Spirit brings them into the unity of the Body of Christ.

It is glorious to see in the book of Acts the power of the Spirit to save and his power to keep such diverse and different people in the same body. We often overlook the demonstration of power in the early church's unity. It is as men

and women were filled with the Spirit that they generously met each other's needs, prayed and broke bread together, and were of one heart and soul.

Those who are filled with the Spirit are always those who are committed to walking "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:2-3). The Spirit's work is never isolated in individual experience but always overflows in uniting God's people in the love of Christ.

"A greater fruitfulness in ministry"

It was beneficial for Christ to depart and for the age of the Spirit to begin. One of the main reasons is that the Spirit of Christ indwells us, causing us to bear fruit and making us fruitful in ministry. No longer is the center of God's activity in Jerusalem because believers throughout the whole world are filled with the presence of God through the Spirit dwelling in us.

*A Spirit-filled
people experience
great fruitfulness
in ministry and
mission.*

In the Old Testament, we see moments where the Spirit fills certain people for specific tasks. But now, we can all be filled with the Spirit to serve the church effectively. To each, a gift has been given, empowered by the Spirit for the edification of others. As continuationists, we believe that God has given gifts to all believers that are empowered by the Spirit and used for the edification of the church.

A Spirit-filled people experience great fruitfulness in ministry and mission. When the Spirit is at work, we can expect to see joyful service, powerful preaching, bold evangelism, wise leadership, generous giving, and more.

"A deeper gratitude for our salvation"

The presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives is a guarantee in us that we belong to God. Ephesians 1:13-14 says that when we received the gospel and believed in Christ, we "were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory."

This statement is packed with gratitude-inducing richness. The Spirit not only opens our hearts to respond to the gospel, but he becomes in us a seal, the very mark of God's ownership. Furthermore, God gives us the Spirit as a guarantee, the first installment of all that the Spirit will do in and for us. The application of Christ's glorious work to our lives is the work of the Spirit from first to last.

The presence of the Spirit in us should therefore give us overwhelming gratitude for the gift of salvation. A Spirit-filled people are those "giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:13-14).

A Spirit-Filled People

We who are sinners have been forgiven of our many sins and purchased with the precious blood of Jesus Christ. We now belong to God and the kingdom of his Son. We share in the heavenly inheritance and will one day see our Savior face to face. It is the Holy Spirit who works all of this in our lives, leading us ever more deeply into a life of gratitude and assurance.

What glorious things the Spirit does in the lives of God's people! May this awareness compel us all to seek continually to be filled with the Spirit, that Christ might be more glorious in our eyes and his character more richly displayed in our lives.

JOSELO MERCADO

Joselo Mercado is senior pastor at [Iglesia Gracia Soberana de Gaithersburg](#) (Gaithersburg, MD).

THE PRIORITY OF APPLICATION

KEN MELLINGER

"Compelled by grace, believers grow in the knowledge of God, obey Christ's commands, walk by the Spirit, mortify sin, and pursue God's priorities and purposes."

(The Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith, "Life in Christ")

"Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ." (Col. 1:28)

What is your purpose in life? How will you live? *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* (1647) wonderfully begins this way:

Q1: What is the chief end of man?

A1: Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.

To glorify God means you are growing in Christlikeness. Your aim is maturity. The Christian life is the very best life to live. No wealth or possession or even a sin that persistently tempts you can compare with the life that is yours in Jesus Christ. The benefits are endless, and you have Jesus himself as Savior, Lord, and friend. One day you shall see him as he is and be like him. This is our glorious hope! What a day that will be.

However, between today and that day, we have challenges. The Christian life is simple, but it isn't easy. We have persistent enemies like the world, the flesh, and the devil. The Bible describes our life in Christ as a walk (Rom. 6:4), a race (1 Cor. 9:24), a fight (2 Tim. 4:7), a farmer's work (Gal. 6:9), and a soldier's warfare (2 Tim. 2:3). All require effort for success. So how can we become mature?

The path to maturity runs through obedience as we apply the Scriptures in our hearts and lives. "Scripture alone is our supreme and final authority and the rule of faith and life."¹ This calls for us to hear the Word and apply the Word in our lives. Such application has been a value in Sovereign Grace Churches from the very beginning.

Our *Statement of Faith* describes the reality of our growth in Jesus Christ. The necessity and priority of application are stated this way: "Compelled by grace, believers grow in the knowledge of God, obey Christ's commands, walk by the Spirit, mortify sin, and pursue God's priorities and purposes."²

Let's reflect briefly on each of the phrases in this important sentence.

"Compelled by Grace"

The Christian life begins by grace, and we are sustained by grace. Grace is rightly defined as the unmerited favor of God toward man. Grace is described as amazing by John Newton in the hymn "Amazing Grace" because it has not been and cannot be earned by its recipients. Titus 2:11-12 helps us see grace is not a thing or an impersonal force but is a person: "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age."

In short, Jesus has appeared, saved us, and trains us to hate sin and live godly lives. This is maturity. The grace of God and the love of God meet in the person and work of Jesus Christ. John Stott says, "Grace is love that cares and stoops and rescues."³

God loves us, and when we see, know, and feel his rescuing care for us at

1. STATEMENT OF FAITH, "THE SCRIPTURES."

2. STATEMENT OF FAITH, "LIFE IN CHRIST."

3. JOHN STOTT, *CHRIST THE CONTROVERSALIST: A STUDY IN SOME ESSENTIALS OF EVANGELICAL RELIGION* (CAROL STREAM: TYNDALE, 1970), 214.

the cross, our lives are radically changed for the glory of God. We respond to grace by pursuing maturity.

"Believers grow in the knowledge of God"

It has been said that the most important thing about us is what comes into our minds when we think about God. Do you know God as merciful, gracious, faithful, abounding in steadfast love, patient and kind, gentle and lowly? Or do you think of God as harsh and frustrated with you?

One way to grow in our knowledge of God is to read the four gospels and become familiar with Jesus. Note well his response to sinners. Jesus always desires the very best for us.

"Obey Christ's commands"

As we grow in our knowledge of God, our love for God will flourish. Because love conquered us, we find an increasing desire to obey the commandments of God. As disciples, we love obedience because we love Jesus. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

*As disciples, we
love obedience
because we love
Jesus.*

It is a happy thing for us that the commands of God are not wearisome or heavy burdens. God is for us, not against us, and obedience bears wonderful fruit.

"Walk by the Spirit"

This is the next phrase in the *Statement of Faith*. To walk by the Spirit means we live our lives responding to the desires of the Holy Spirit and not our old sinful nature. The Spirit points us to Jesus and gives us the gift of assurance that we are the children of God. As a result, we desire to walk in humility, gentleness, patience, love, and we bear other fruit of the Spirit in increasing measure. We live under the control and guidance of another.

"Mortify sin"

To put it positively, we seek the things that are above and set our minds on

things that are above. Negatively, we put to death what is earthly in us. This means we die to pride, selfishness, sexual immorality, and covetousness. We put off ungodliness, and we put on godliness.

Jesus tells us it is better to put sin to death than enter hell (Matt. 5:29), so we take serious steps to kill sin. We are not morbidly introspective, but we do well to pay attention to our responses to the heat of life. It is also wise to consider things we ought to be doing but are not doing in applying the Word to our lives. Consider one area where God would have you grow toward maturity.

"Pursue God's Priorities and Purposes"

Among the purposes of God is his commitment to building his church.

*The promise of
God is that in
Christ, our labor is
never in vain.*

Therefore, we serve the purpose of God by being actively involved in our local church. We hear the whole counsel of God preached, observe sacraments, and love others by practicing the "one anothers" of the New Testament.

Pray for your pastors. Serve willingly. Proclaim Jesus to others, help them grow in maturity, and as you do, you

will discover you maturing. The promise of God is that in Christ, our labor is never in vain. "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58).

The Irreplaceable Role of Conviction

One final thought: Underlying all these things and critical to our growth is the role of conviction. The stronger our convictions, the deeper our maturity. Author Jerry Bridges explains: "A conviction is a determinative belief: something you believe so strongly that it affects the way you live. Someone has observed that a belief is what you hold, but a conviction is what holds you. You may live contrary to what you believe, but you cannot live contrary

to your convictions."⁴

Oh, how we need conviction in our life to grow in maturity! We need a determined belief that Christ is worthy of our lives. We need a settled conviction that there is joy in obedience, danger in sin, power in the Spirit, and hope for change in the gospel.

We are not yet what we will be, but let's press onward together toward the goal for the prize. To God be all the glory for the fruit of his grace in our lives. Onward!

4. JERRY BRIDGES, *THE DISCIPLINES OF GRACE* (COLORADO SPRING, CO: NAVPRESS, 1994), 162-163.

KEN MELLINGER

Ken Mellinger is an elder at [Living Hope Church](#) (Middletown, PA) and is the chairman of the Sovereign Grace Executive Committee.

BIBLICAL FAITHFULNESS IN AN AGE OF GENDER CONFUSION

BRIAN CHESEMORE

“Gender, designated by God through our biological sex, is therefore neither incidental to our identity nor fluid in its definition, but is essential to our identity as male and female.”

(The Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith, "Creation, Providence, and Man")

A few years ago, the American public received the startling update that a major department store determined to make transgender preferences, rather than biological realities, the basis for access into their bathrooms. Around the same time, the Boy Scouts, who already decided that a homosexual man could lead a troop, now concluded that restricting girls was sexually biased—yes, in the *Boy Scouts*.

The social scene of the West has undoubtedly changed—especially as it relates to the topic of sexuality.

Today issues surrounding sexual identity, preferences, and practices, which were formerly debated in academia and championed on the social periphery, have successfully made a collective charge into the cultural and political center. Meanwhile, biblical views of marriage, family, and sexuality have been

swiftly escorted to the fringes. Standing on the outer edges of culture's idea of relevance, they are tagged as oppressive constructs which hinder a person's "*expressive individualism*," or worse, demean an individual's personhood.

Facing the Strange

In 1972, David Bowie was officially introduced to American rock n' roll with the song, "Changes." "*Ch-ch-ch-changes*," goes the chorus, "*turn and face the strange*." His bold declaration to all that the mainstream was under direct assault. But it wasn't just music he sought to transform. His biographer, Buckley, described Bowie as one who "plays up the self-made myth of his butterfly nature, his innate ambivalence, and his endless musical, sexual and political vacillation."¹

All that was traditional was put on notice.

For Christians, our goal is not to hold on to cultural tradition but to conform to biblical truth. This means we must be willing to have God's Word challenge traditions that are wrong, including male superiority, the mistreatment of women, and contempt for those who sin sexually.

We have seen the rapid erosion of God's design for manhood and womanhood.

And yet, there is no denying that we have seen the rapid erosion of God's design for manhood and womanhood, marriage, family, and sexual purity in recent decades. Here are just a few examples:

- Marriage, unless redefined, is relegated to a by-gone age.
- Family, as defined by a husband and wife and children, is considered an oppressive construct.
- Pornography continues to defile beauty and detach intimacy from the safety of marriage, corrupting the viewer and those viewed.

1. DAVID BUCKLEY, *STRANGE FASCINATION: DAVID BOWIE, THE DEFINITIVE STORY* (LONDON, ENGLAND: VIRGIN, 1999).

- In today's hook-up culture, a sexual partner's name, gender, and commitment are considered arbitrary or irrelevant.
- Denials of distinction between men and women emerged from an egalitarian interpretation of Scripture.

And now a lie has gained footing, and it is devastating our generation. It purports that our ontology, our very physical being, is up for grabs. What your biology tells you carries no authority and is irrelevant to your personhood and identity. Sexuality is no longer fixed but fluid—a means by which we express our ever-changing personhood.

Are we simply to turn and face “the strange”—life as it was never supposed to be?

Who is Sovereign?

Such a turn is the natural effect of one taken long ago. Mankind took their “turn” away from God and his authority, and the result was a unified effort to establish the rule of the created rather than the Creator.

John Stuart Mill, the English Philosopher and Founding Father of Western Liberalism, declared, “Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.”

The Creator and Sovereign have been exchanged for a new king. Now we are sovereign—humanity rules. Go ahead and crown our desires as King because our ultimate turn is not upward but inward.

Now, even the English language must submit and “face the strange.” It must develop. It must adapt. Terms like cisgender, sexual dysphoria and gender fluidity illustrate a revolution that has swept through our dictionaries, schools, social settings, and counseling offices. Even in churches, we find terms like gay Christian and sexual minority.

This is our contemporary landscape.

Despite the confusing impact of these developments, the Bible speaks clearly and authoritatively, convincingly and compassionately on sexuality. It ministers to those who submit to it, and it positions its adherents to care for others. It reminds us that only a correct understanding of God's character

and Christ's grace produces joy, hope, cleansing, beauty, and peace.

Might it be that Paul's chorus should drown out the innumerable voices of our culture?

"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." (Phil. 4:8)

Into the strange change of our day, what could be more timely, what could be a more starkly refreshing sight, than a statement of faith that reiterates the biblical view of what is true and unchanging?

We Believe, the Sovereign Grace *Statement of Faith*, positions us to obey Paul's command to think rightly, purely, and carefully about our sexuality. The section *Man as Male and Female* reminds us of what is true and fixed, as revealed by God himself:

"Gender, designated by God through our biological sex, is therefore neither incidental to our identity nor fluid in its definition, but is essential to our identity as male and female."

From what authority do we suppose we have the audacity to pen such words? (The battle over sexuality is ultimately a question of who is in charge.) Our authority is neither culture nor politics nor personal autonomy. It's much higher and more trustworthy.

"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27).

Purposefully and intentionally, God created every man and woman.

"For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps. 139:13-14a).

Made in God's image, formed by his hands, identified biologically, we are the beneficiaries of divine and purposeful design. Genesis 1 pictures nothing that is haphazard, nothing that is arbitrary, nothing about our design that is left for debate.

And our *Statement of Faith* captures this beautifully and succinctly.

Implications abound in our culture's desire to elevate our desires above all competing authorities. Gender is downgraded to changeable or irrelevant. Desire rules without direction. Pornography and promiscuity are increasingly normalized—because both are seen as healthy sexual self-expression. Modesty and self-control supposedly oppress rather than reflecting deep purpose in the preservation of that which is beautiful. Ironically, in all this, the body is dishonored as merely a means to the end of fulfilling one's desires.

All other authorities, parental or political, linguistic or legal, must adapt. Into our culture's failed pursuit of freedom and individualism, into the inevitable story of deep darkness, confusion, and shame, we carry the light and life of truth.

A Loving and Purposeful Design

What is this truth? Nancy Pearcey writes, "Scripture teaches that the creational differentiation of male and female is a good thing ...The question is, do we accept that created structure or do we reject it? Do we affirm the goodness of creation or deny it? Do we see the body as a reservoir of meaning, a source of moral truths? Is there a teleology of the body that we are called to respect?" ²

In the realm of sexuality and gender, we ought to be known more for what we are for than what we are against. In the Scriptures, we encounter the beauty of equality and diversity. In God's economy, gender is essential. The body is esteemed. Singleness and marriage are filled with purpose.

God's Word shares about a Creator's loving and purposeful design. God's Word brings the powerful message of a Savior who entered our rebellion, marked by darkness and confusion, and folly. God, in His love, sent Jesus to redeem us through the Cross, remove our shame, forgive our sin, and restore the beauty and sanity of intentional and fixed design.

Through Jesus, I experience true and radical change...not in just a "part" of me, but at the very core of my being, in a transformed heart. By the power of the gospel, I am born again. All the shame I rightly carried for all the

2. NANCY PEARCEY, *LOVE THY BODY* (GRAND RAPIDS, MI: BAKER BOOKS, 2001), 156.

wrongs I have done, in word, thought, and deed, is covered by the blood of the Lamb. Now I have a spotless righteousness, not my own. Now I have the experience and hope of change.

To him, we turn. In him, we know true change.

To those who were lost in the mire of sexual sin and confusion, the gospel alone enables us to declare the beautiful reality, “Such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

BRIAN CHESEMORE

Brian Chesemore is an elder at [Sovereign Grace Church Louisville](#) (Louisville, KY) and also serves on the Sovereign Grace Executive Committee.

TEACHING THEOLOGY TO CHILDREN

MARTY MACHOWSKI

Welcoming a newborn child into the world is one of life's great blessings. Along with the joys of parenting come the many demands that every parent knows: sleepless nights, feeding, comforting, changing diapers, and more. But in time, these things are eclipsed by the preeminent responsibility of parenting, which is teaching our children theology.

However, many parents don't know where to begin. For them, the word theology evokes an image of thick books filled with complicated words. But theology simply means "God study." So, teaching our kids theology (about God) is passing the truth we've received from Scripture on to our kids. There are two key elements in this undertaking – our instruction and our example.

A Visit with a Patriarch

"You can go in now," aunt Gertrude announced. My wife Lois and I were recently engaged, and it was time to meet her 104-year-old grandfather, Carl. I'd never met a centenarian before. The Rauch family attributed their salvation to Grandpa's prayers and example. His pronounced devotion to Christ undergirded the truth he passed on through his letters and testimony. It is said that people wanted to be with Grandpa from the time he got up in

the morning to the time he retired for bed because of the way his life and conversation testified to his love for Christ.

Lois introduced me as we approached Grandpa's bed and announced our engagement. Carl's warm face smiled as he took her hand and offered us his congratulations. With introductions complete, it was time for a theology lesson. Carl began a short survey through Scripture from memory, ending the lesson with sharing how he "longed to kneel at Jesus' feet."

Grandpa encouraged us to "Always make room in your home for Jesus. Just as Mary and Martha did whenever he passed by." Grandpa Carl's life demonstrated the two fundamental principles Scripture outlines for passing on our faith. First, to live a life worthy of the calling (testimony), and second, to teach your children about God (theology).

My single twenty-minute encounter with Grandpa Rauch (he passed on to glory a few months later) ignited a desire to imitate his life and follow his example to pass on theology validated by a life of devotion and prayer to my children and grandchildren.

*Teaching our kids
theology is passing
on the truth we've
received.*

Don't Just Teach It, Live It

This tandem strategy is outlined for us in scripture. Jesus taught the disciples theology while he lived a life of obedience and devotion to the Father. The apostle Paul said, "Be imitators of me as I am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). Paul charged Timothy to follow this same pattern – to teach theology and set before the people an example (1 Tim. 4:11-13). "Persist in this," Paul said, "for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Tim. 4:16). This is also the tandem strategy God outlines for parents.

After Israel's exodus from Egypt, Moses charged parents with two commands. First, to love God with all their heart and live for him, and second, to teach the commands of the Lord to their children. These are the same two characteristics I observed in Grandpa Carl's life. Moses said:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love

the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:4–9)

He's Not Just "The God," He's "Our God"

Notice how Moses emphasizes our relationship with God and makes it the top priority in passing our faith to the next generation. We are not just teaching a theology lesson; we are passing on our passion for God. The goal is to introduce them to "our God." Our worship validates the gospel message we proclaim. Also, Moses charges parents to be devoted to the Lord's commands and, by implication, to live them. Jesus affirmed the connection between our love for God and the life we live when he said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

Therefore, teaching our children "diligently" (Deut. 6:7) involves formal training—like leading regular family devotions—and demonstrating a lifestyle of worship to undergird that teaching. The Apostle Paul said, "Let the Word of God dwell in you richly," which involves "teaching" but also "singing with thankfulness to God" (Col. 3:16).

Beyond formal devotions, life presents many opportunities to talk about God. That is why Moses says whether we are in our house or on a trip somewhere, we look for ways to pass on our love for God and his Word. The more we love the Lord, the easier it will be for us to make him a regular, moment-by-moment part of our life, and the more our kids will embrace what we teach.

A Few Practical Tips

Don't hide your love for God from your kids. Talk about your relationship with God. Share the discoveries you make in scripture from your personal devotions. Show them the verse in the Bible and share how God is living and active in your life.

When the Holy Spirit convicts or encourages you through a Christian book you are reading, share it with your kids. When you hear a fantastic testimony that touches your heart, don't just tell all your friends; share it with your kids. Print out that encouraging email and bring it home to read after dinner. Our loving relationship with God authenticates the truth we share.

I can remember when my twins reached an age where it seemed good to begin teaching them theology (about God) more formally. I felt so ill-equipped for the task. Since then, it's been my goal to write books that parents can use to make teaching theology easier.

There are plenty of good Bible storybooks you can read to your younger children and easy-to-follow Bible studies you can use for older kids. You can review the Sunday message. Read through and teach them the Sovereign Grace *Statement of Faith*.

A great time to do family devotions is after dinner, before dessert. You're already gathered for the meal, and you can use ice-cream as leverage. If your devotions fall into a season of neglect, remember "the righteous falls seven times and rises again" (Prov. 24:16). Falling only becomes failure if you refuse to rise and keep going.

Remember that your devotions don't need to be fantastic. Shoot for faithful. While God calls us to do the work of planting the gospel and watering it with our prayers, he alone can make it grow (1 Cor. 3:7).

While my devotion to God hasn't reached the level where people want to be with me all day, I try to ensure my life is a living testimony of my love for Christ. I've failed to be consistent with family devotions during life's busy seasons. But, I've made it my goal to follow Grandpa's exhortation to "always make room for Jesus," knowing that all of life is a classroom and my children are always watching.

MARTY MACHOWSKI

Marty Machowski is an elder at [Covenant Fellowship Church](#) (Glen Mills, PA) and is chairman of the Sovereign Grace Polity Committee.

LABORING TOGETHER: THE PROCESS OF CREATING OUR STATEMENT OF FAITH

JOSH BLOUNT

"Cause me to walk in your truth, and teach me – for you are the God of my salvation. For you I wait all the day long." (Psalm 25:5)

If there were a single verse that best captured the heart behind the writing and ratification of our *Statement of Faith*, this prayer of David's would be a strong candidate. Writing, editing, and affirming together our *Statement of Faith* was motivated by the desire to carefully and faithfully reflect the Lord's truth, the truths of our salvation.

The writing of our new *Statement of Faith* to replace the old version began in 2013 with the ratification of our new polity and the formation of a national Theology Committee, chaired and led by Jeff Purswell. The Theology Committee was tasked with evaluating the then-current *Statement of Faith* and considering whether an expanded, rewritten version would serve our union of churches.

When that evaluation led to an affirmative answer, the actual writing began.

The Start of the Work

After deciding upon the structure of the new document and sketching out

the rough form it would take (a process which took several months), the members of the Theology Committee divided up section headings and began the process of writing, editing, and rewriting initial drafts.

The first significant date was our Council of Elder's (CoE) meeting in 2015 when the Theology Committee submitted drafts of three sections – "The Person of Christ," "The Triune God," and "The Scriptures" – to the CoE. But that raised its own questions: if the CoE approved these, were they then effective immediate as our binding *Statement of Faith*, even though they represented only a partial rewrite of a much longer final document? Should they be plugged, section by section, into the old document until it was totally rewritten? And how could we best involve the feedback and counsel of all Sovereign Grace elders, not merely those on the Theology Committee?

Working with the Polity Committee and the CoE, a process was created whereby the Theology Committee would write new sections each year, submit them to the CoE, and then open a period of feedback from every elder team within Sovereign Grace. After that period, the Theology Committee would edit the sections to incorporate the feedback and then submit the newly revised sections at the following CoE for provisional approval. The final ratification would wait until all sections had gone through the full writing, feedback, and rewriting process.

A Yearly Rhythm

This became the yearly rhythm of the Theology Committee and the Council of Elders: submit the previous years' edited and rewritten sections for provisional approval, as well as submit new sections to open the feedback process.

The 2016 Council of Elders provisionally approved "The Person of Christ," "The Triune God," and "The Scriptures," while receiving "Creation, Providence and Man," "God's Sovereign Purposes," and "Man's Sin and Its Effects" to begin seeking feedback. In 2017 the Council approved those documents and received the next four new sections. 2018 saw the last three sections were submitted to the Council to open the feedback process, and these sections were approved at the 2019 Council.

However, with the entire document completed over a six-year process, at that time, the Theology Committee asked the Council and received a final year to edit the entire document, making stylistic edits and ensuring that nothing

significant had been omitted. The 2020 Council of Elders was thus set as the date for approval of the final document by the CoE, who would then send it to each Regional Assembly of Elders for ratification. If three-quarters of the regions voted to affirm the new *Statement of Faith*, it would become the binding confessional document for Sovereign Grace Churches.

Zoom at Its Best

However, as readers will undoubtedly remember, 2020 was a year of oddities and exceptional circumstances! Our Pastors Conference, and thus the 2020 Council of Elders, could not meet in person due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and so the final CoE vote took place in a Zoom meeting.

While no one would have chosen this route, there was something at least oddly familiar about the *Statement of Faith*, born out of dozens of Theology Committee Zoom meetings, receiving its final authorization in a Zoom meeting! By the grace of God, that milestone in our history as Sovereign Grace Churches was marked by total unanimity.

*That milestone in
our history was
marked by total
unanimity.*

One by one, men from the United States, Mexico, Canada, and Australia, some relative newcomers to Sovereign Grace and others who had seen its fledgling beginnings decades before, all gave their affirmation to this new document expressing the beliefs we hold most dear: the truths of our salvation, and of the God of our salvation. The ratification by the Regional Assemblies was likewise unanimous.

And so, our new *Statement of Faith* became the Sovereign Grace *Statement of Faith*.

A Shared Conviction

As one who has been on the Theology Committee from its very start, I know I speak for all the past and current members in giving much credit where much credit is due. Without the leadership, theologian's mind, and pastor's heart of Jeff Purswell, our *Statement of Faith* would not exist. Jeff,

from all of us, please receive our gratitude and affection!

And now the Sovereign Grace *Statement of Faith* exists, not merely as the work of any individual or committee, but as the common conviction of all Sovereign Grace elders, present and future. We believe these things to be true, revealed by God. As ordained men, we commit ourselves to them and place ourselves under them. To the Lord alone belongs the evaluation and the fruits of this process of writing a statement of faith and the final product.

And so Psalm 25:5 makes a fitting conclusion as well: may the Lord continue to lead us in his truth, and teach us, for he is the God of our salvation, for whom we wait. Both now and forevermore!

JOSH BLOUNT

Josh Blount is an elder at [Living Faith Church](#) (Franklin, WV).

BUILD SOMETHING DURABLE: THE VALUE OF THINKING INSTITUTIONALLY

JARED MELLINGER

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

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

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

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

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

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

An Institutional Treasure

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

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

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

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

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

The Individualist and the Institutional

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Faithful Reception

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

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

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

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

Hecló also describes thinking institutionally as stretching of time horizons.

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

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

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

3. *IBID.*, 109-110.

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

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

Building Together

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Will we labor to
hold fast to the
truth delivered to
us?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

JARED MELLINGER

Jared Mellinger is senior pastor of [Covenant Fellowship Church](#) (Glen Mills, PA) and serves on the Sovereign Grace Leadership Team.

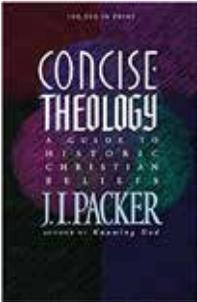
Recommended Reading

“If you have believed [the apostolic doctrine] and received it, you have new life, spiritual life, and that will show itself in this way: You will be hungering and thirsting for more. It will become the greatest interest of your life. You will still be interested in other books, but you will find, as I find – and I say this to the glory of God – that there are many books I would like to read, but I just do not have the time. I am too busy reading the Bible and books that help me understand it.

Now I am not criticizing the others. I like to read books on history. I like reading biographies. I like reading about music. I like reading about medicine, aspects of science, psychology, philosophy, and so on. But my problem is to find the time. I find life here in this Book. It moves my heart. It melts me. It fills me with righteousness. It strengthens my feeble will. I want this.”

MARTYN LLOYD-JONES

Authentic Christianity, 115



CONCISE THEOLOGY

BY J.I. PACKER

(TYNDALE, 1993/267 PAGES)

AARON LAW

There is something marvelous when a person skilled in a matter does it well. The snug-fitting boards fashioned by a carpenter and the newborn wrapped and settled by a nurse are beautiful things. In like manner, J. I. Packer's *Concise Theology* is a beautiful thing. Anyone who has read theology or tried to explain it knows the difficulty of summarizing truth without being overly simplistic. Packer's skill is a great service to the church and edifying to Christians.

The goal of *Concise Theology* is to present biblical doctrines in a succinct and accessible way. Packer writes in his preface, "Remembering that the Lord Jesus Christ called those he wanted fed *sheep* rather than *giraffes*, I have aimed to keep things as simple as possible" (xii). The book contains a brief engagement with 94 theological topics, each explained in 2-4 pages. Each topic is introduced with a heading, a summary phrase, and a relevant Bible verse.

Packer writes from the standpoint of a Reformed, Evangelical theologian. The book avoids needless controversies, soapboxes, and personal hobby horses. At the same time, it doesn't shy away from allowing Scripture to speak against the grain of the age and against beliefs that endanger the church. At almost 30 years old, this book has begun to stand the test of time.

Packer has a way of stating the truth that gets to the heart of the matter with sticking power. Addressing the topic of 'Creation,' he writes, "To say that he created 'out of nothing' is to confess the mystery, not explain it" (21). Addressing the topic of 'Works,' he writes, "The truth is that, though we are justified by faith alone, the faith that justifies is never alone" (160).

There are three things that I appreciate about *Concise Theology*.

Brief and Accessible

I appreciate how the brevity of the chapters makes theological topics immediately accessible. After reading the chapter on 'Session' out loud to my family, my wife remarked, "Wow, that's it? That was so good." Christ's session was explained in two pages. After reading the chapter on 'Transcendence,' one of my teenage sons remarked, "That blows my mind!"

Packer writes,

God is limited neither by space (he is everywhere in his fullness continually) nor by time (there is no 'present moment' into which he is locked as we are). Theologians refer to God's freedom from limits and bounds as his infinity, immensity, and transcendence...As he upholds everything in being, so he has everything everywhere always before his mind, in its own relation to his all-inclusive plan and purpose for every item and every person in his world. (28)

*Packer has a way
of stating the truth
that gets to the
heart of the matter
with sticking
power.*

Each topic is deep yet accessible.

Theology as Worship

I appreciate the commitment to apply theology as worship. Packer writes in the book's preface, "Theology is for doxology and devotion—this is, the praise of God and the practice of godliness...Theology is at its healthiest when it is consciously under the eye of God of whom it speaks, and when it is singing to his glory" (xii).

This commitment continues throughout the book. Addressing 'Illumination,' he writes, "The way to benefit fully from the Spirit's ministry of illumination is by serious Bible study, serious prayer, and serious response in obedience to whatever truths one has been shown already" (155). And addressing 'Creation,' he writes, "Realizing our moment-by-moment dependence on God the Creator for our very existence makes it appropriate to live lives of devotion, commitment, gratitude, and loyalty toward him, and scandalous not to. Godliness starts here, with God the sovereign Creator as the first focus of our thoughts" (22).

Scripture References

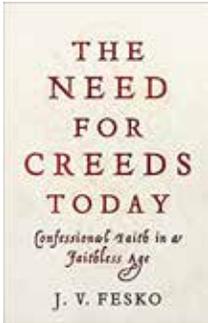
I also appreciate the many references to Scripture. These references provide both a Scriptural backing for what is formulated as well as a starting point for deeper study. Addressing the topic of ‘Salvation,’ Packer poses the question, “What are believers saved from?” (146). His answer is a single sentence with twelve references to Scripture.

Due to the book’s stated goal of brevity, readers should be aware that it doesn’t read like a book but more like articles in a theological dictionary, each addressing a distinct topic and packed with Scripture references. One way to approach the book is to read one brief chapter each day, privately or with others. Reading too many sections in one sitting will jump readers from one topic to another, which might not be as beneficial. Individuals can use the many Scripture references as a great way to open the Bible and discover where these topics are taught.

As marvelous as it is when a person skilled in a matter does it well, *Concise Theology* leaves us not marveling at Packer’s skill in formulating theology but at our Creator and Savior God. It whets our appetite to know him better. It is this God—his salvation, his grace, and his purpose— that we were created to know and worship.

AARON LAW

Aaron Law is senior pastor of [Grace Covenant Church](#) (Jacksonville, FL).



THE NEED FOR CREEDS TODAY

BY J.V. FESKO

(BAKER ACADEMIC,
2020/160 PAGES)

RILEY SPRING

I grew up in an evangelical Anglican church in Sydney. Every Sunday, the leaders, often barefoot and with long, surfy hair, would conduct casual and contemporary services but interspersed with a disjointed set of archaic set prayers, creeds, and communion from the *Book of Common Prayer*. The contrast led most of us to dislike these traditions, and it left me wondering why we didn't just ditch the old-fashioned and out-of-place prayer book for a completely modern service.

Why was this? It was because I lacked a biblical and historical understanding of their purpose and the importance of joining in the chorus of the great cloud of witnesses who had gone before me. I didn't see that the creeds, confessions, and prayers of the past were not "the dead faith of the living but the living faith of the dead" (xix), which can help us know, love, and protect the gospel today.

The Living Faith of the Dead

J.V. Fesko's *The Need for Creeds Today* is a book designed to bridge that gap. In the wake of hyper-individualism and the deconfessionalisation of the church, this (short) book is a helpful guide to the biblical and historical arguments for the necessity and benefits of a confessional faith. That is a faith rooted firmly in the Bible but draws from the deep wells of the church's history to explain and defend the truth in our time.

Apart from the story about a theology debate that narrowly avoided devolving into a duel to the death (see chapter 5), this book is quite academic and reads as a collection of five cogent and concise essays, heavily footnoted, that would likely suit pastors and leaders who are looking for an introduction to

the topic, more than the average church member.

Biblical Argument

The first chapter outlines the biblical argument for creating and passing down confessions. Drawing from the Passover liturgy (Ex. 13:14–15), the giving of the Shema (Deut. 6:4–6), the apostle Paul's five "trust-worthy sayings" (1 Tim. 1:15; 3:1; 4:7–9; 2 Tim. 2:11–13; Titus 3:4–8), and Jude's exhortation (Jude 3), Fesko concludes that all Christians must contend for the faith once delivered to the saints and that Christians cannot merely quote scripture references but "must explain, interpret, and restate in their own words what the Bible means" in their own historical moment.

*All Christians must
contend for the
faith once delivered
to the saints.*

To do this well, "we must stand on the shoulders of giants to catch a glimpse of the glory of our triune God," and so we need the work of those who have gone before us, which leads us to chapter 2 (17).

A Brief Tour of Protestant Confessions

Chapter 2 surveys the creeds and confessions borne out of the Protestant Reformation from 1500–1700 and their usefulness for today. This tour of confessions was like being guided through a grand estate (think Downton Abbey!), the opening of each door revealing a room of treasures, history, and complexity that left me overwhelmed with all that I didn't know but intrigued to learn more.

We Need More Than 'No Creed but The Bible'

Chapter 3 traces the internal and external causes of how the modern Church has drifted away from a confessional faith into the anaemic "no creed but the Bible," resulting in a capitulation to the sins of our age.

Chapter 4 helpfully outlines the benefits of confessions; namely, that they help us distinguish the truth from falsehood, create wider fence-lines for a more diversified orthodoxy (that is, leaving room for chari-

table disagreement on contestable matters), and create a time-stamp of the truths the Church needed to guard and defend in each moment in history (for example, the Danvers Statement on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood).

The final chapter, the near theological duel to the death story(!), argues for the necessary link between our confessional faith and our holiness as believers. It is a warning against allowing the sins of our age to influence our defense of the truth (e.g., flame wars on Twitter) and a call to rest in our union with Christ for the requisite holiness for the task.

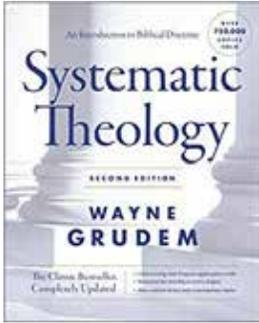
Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

This book has helped me to appreciate the biblical and historical significance of our new *Statement of Faith*—how it will assist us to be unified globally as a family of churches centered on the gospel, and how it will help us to train future generations of pastors and members who will contend for the faith delivered to the saints.

I am also excited to lead my church in Parramatta to jump up onto the back of the theological giants of the ages so that we may gain an even better view of the glory of our Triune God as expressed in old, rich, and well-worn statements, helping us to know, apply, proclaim, and protect the gospel in our day and age.

RILEY SPRING

Riley Spring is senior pastor at [Sovereign Grace Church Parramatta](#) (Parramatta, NSW, Australia).



SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY, 2ND EDITION

BY WAYNE GRUDEM

(ZONDERVAN ACADEMIC,
2020/1616 PAGES)

JEFF PURSWELL

I remember exactly where I was when I was first exposed to Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*. It was 1994, in my first semester of seminary, sitting in a class entitled ST611: God, Man, & Sin. The instructor handed out xeroxed copies (google it) of a yet-to-be-published textbook to be read for the course. The instructor was Wayne Grudem, and the textbook was *Systematic Theology (ST)*.

No one could have anticipated the influence of that first edition, published a few months later. The book has sold some 750,000 copies, unprecedented for a theology text of that scope. Its arrival a quarter-century ago preceded, and no doubt helped precipitate, a resurgence in Reformed theology in the U.S. and beyond. Since its publication, perhaps no book has done more to increase theological literacy among English-speaking evangelicals (to say nothing of its influence among Korean, Portuguese, Arabic, Russian, Romanian, Spanish, French, Mandarin, Amharic, German, and Italian readers!).

Given this broad influence and Grudem's status as a veteran theologian and elder statesman of evangelicalism, the 2nd edition of this text arrived in 2020 with much anticipation. It does not disappoint. The new edition retains the characteristic clarity and warmth of the 1st, with additions and updates that will prompt many long-time users of *ST* to spring for the new volume.

What's New

Most of the book's changes represent additional material, adding up to around 200 extra pages. Some of the added material is brand new content, while in a few places, Grudem changed his position from the 1st edition.

Here's a sampling of some of the most significant changes.

- Grudem substantially rewrote his chapter on the clarity of Scripture (ch. 6), giving much more attention to the requirements for understanding Scripture (time, effort, the use of means, etc.). He also addresses major objections to this doctrine from liberalism, post-modern hermeneutics, and Roman Catholicism. The result is a much more robust, satisfying treatment of this important doctrine.
- In the chapter on creation (ch. 15), Grudem changed his position on the age of the earth. In the 1st edition, he was neutral on the question, but he now favors an old earth/old universe view (as with most evangelical theologians, he continues to affirm that both old earth and young earth positions are consistent with a high view of Scripture). This chapter also contains a much more lengthy critique of both neo-Darwinism in general and theistic evolution in particular (drawing at length from the book *Theistic Evolution: A Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Critique*, which Grudem co-edited in 2017).

*Along with these
content changes,
Grudem also made
some valuable
updates.*

- In 1994, the so-called “new perspective on Paul” (NPP) was still relegated mainly to academic circles. Its influence has spread widely since then, and in this 2nd edition, Grudem includes a critique of the NPP and its implications for the doctrine of justification.
- The new edition addresses more recent objections to the penal substitutionary view of the atonement in chapter 27.
- The chapter on church government (ch. 47) discusses at much greater length than before the question of whether women can serve as elders, treating additional Scriptural texts and addressing further objections to the complementarian position.
- Along with these content changes, Grudem also made some valu-

able updates. He changed all the Scripture references from the RSV to the ESV (which wasn't published until 2001). Contemporary worship songs were added to the end of each chapter, joining the traditional hymns from the 1st edition. And pastors especially will appreciate the updated bibliographies for each chapter.

Responding to a Controversy

Readers familiar with recent Trinitarian debates concerning the relationship between the Father and Son will be particularly interested in changes to Grudem's chapter on the Trinity (ch. 14).

- A substantive doctrinal change here is his embrace of the eternal generation of the Son, based to a large extent on Grudem's changed understanding of the meaning of the term *monogenēs* from "only, unique, one and only" (as in the standard Greek lexicon and most modern English versions: ESV, RSV, CSB, NET, NIV, NLT) to "only begotten" (KJV, NASB). This change has been welcomed by some of Grudem's critics, who contended that the rejection of eternal generation denied him a key basis for formulating the Father-Son relationship with both its equality of essence and differentiated relations. (*Note: The recently adopted SGC Statement of Faith followed historic orthodoxy on this point, which affirmed eternal generation not simply on the basis of monogenēs, but also a number of texts—e.g., John 5, Hebrews 1—that support the doctrine without using the term.*)
- Grudem's new edition also addresses objections to his position on the Son's eternal submission to the Father (variously abbreviated ESS, ERAS, EFS). At issue here is the question of just how the three Persons of the Godhead are to be distinguished. How do we speak of differences between the Father-Son-Spirit while preserving their equality in nature and attributes? Not all will be persuaded by Grudem's formulations (e.g., the use of the language of "roles" to differentiate the Persons of the Trinity), but his responses here at least help to clarify some of the confusion (and, at times, misrepresentations) surrounding this debate. Hopefully, they will also dispel concerns about positions some attribute to Grudem, which he himself would deny.

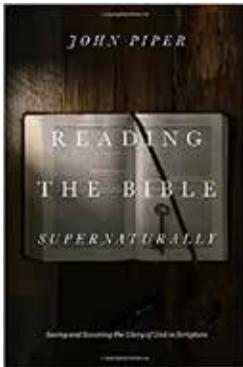
A Classic Made Better

Massive changes have occurred on the evangelical landscape since the original publication of Grudem's *ST*. New theological deviations have appeared, while older ones have reemerged in new garb and blossomed. Cultural upheavals from 9/11 to COVID-19 have transformed life as we know it. What is true of every age seems especially urgent for our own: how does God's Word speak to our modern moment? Upon what ground can we find solid footing when all around us is shifting? It seems the need for the truth and power of God's Word has never in our lifetimes been more acutely felt.

This is what systematic theology is *for*—to give a contemporary articulation of the Christian faith, one suited for its time, answering questions raised by modern concerns. For the past quarter-century, few books have served this purpose more effectively, for a wider range of Christians, than Grudem's *ST*. This new edition promises to continue and extend that tradition of Biblically saturated, clearly written, practically applied, and devotionally rich theology. From the Christian wanting reliable answers to doctrinal questions, to the student ready to delve seriously into theology for the first time, to the pastor wanting a go-to reference work, Grudem's text remains, in my view, the first choice.

JEFF PURSWELL

Jeff Purswell is an elder at [Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville](#) (Louisville, KY), the Director of Theology for Sovereign Grace Churches, and the dean of the [Sovereign Grace Pastors College](#).



READING THE BIBLE SUPERNATURALLY: SEEING AND SAVORING THE GLORY OF GOD IN SCRIPTURE

BY JOHN PIPER

(CROSSWAY, 2017/432 PAGES)

KEITH COLLINS

“Is Google Making Us Stupid?” ...that was the title of an article by NY Times best-selling author Nicholas Carr that caught my attention just over a decade ago. He would write a book titled *The Shallows*, which delved into the way the Digital Age was rewiring the way we interact with the great volume of information that’s out there today.

As a pastor, few things could be more concerning to me than the prospect that the people of God are becoming “shallow” readers since reading the Bible sits at the center of our walk with God.

A Book about Reading

Into this moment, John Piper has written a rather important book for our times, *Reading the Bible Supernaturally: Seeing and Savoring the Glory of God in Scripture*. Do we really need a book on “reading the Bible”? After all, we live in the Information Age—we’re always reading! Well, in an age that is teaching us to click through our Google searches and thumb through our newsfeeds, Piper’s book is going to help us go from “skimming” to “seeing and savoring.”

Piper divides the book into three sections. The first section sets the trajectory for why we read with the answer, “that God’s infinite worth and beauty would be exalted in the everlasting, white-hot worship of the blood brought bride of Christ from every people, language, tribe, and nation”

(56). More than an interaction with words, Piper helps us have a living exchange with God.

This is very much a book about reading—but reading a most unique book. Piper reminds us that a book with supernatural origins “calls for more than your natural kind of reading. Not less. But more. In fact, it calls for the very best of natural reading. But also for more—something beyond what is merely human” (19).

The last two sections of the book explore the dynamics of natural reading and supernatural reading.

Natural Reading

Piper devotes multiple chapters to helping us do the natural act of reading at a much greater level than what Google has been teaching us to do. I remember John Piper introducing me to an old book with a simple title—*How to Read a Book* by Mortimer Adler. In *Reading the Bible Supernaturally*, Piper effectively reminds us how to understand the meaning and the author’s intent; he informs us that reading takes “patience” and “aggressive attentiveness,” he takes a few chapters to teach us how “active reading” means asking questions about words and phrases and also taking time to ponder things like propositions and paradoxes in Scripture.

*This is very much
a book about
reading—but
reading a most
unique book.*

Don’t worry. If you’re not very good at any of that, Piper’s book will be a helpful guide!

If you’ve heard John Piper “cross-examine” a biblical text and lift it off the page to be displayed in three dimensions, then you’ve been exposed to someone who understands that reading the Bible takes the very best of natural reading. While I get that John Piper brings a bit more than the average reader to the act of reading a text, there is so much more to be seen by us all if we will intentionally and aggressively learn to read well.

Supernatural Reading

A critical emphasis of the book is focused on our need to engage the Holy Spirit and to more deeply discover what Jesus meant when He said, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13).

Paul said that “we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God” (1 Cor. 2:12). This is the way God intended us to engage His Word, but in a modern life that is over-scheduled and relentless, this might be our greatest loss in how today’s Christian reads the Bible.

In the natural act of reading, a supernatural revealing is available that is being done by the Holy Spirit (“something beyond what is merely human”). Still, in the same way, that practice of “skimming” may make us miss out on

In the natural act of reading, a supernatural revealing is available that is being done by the Holy Spirit.

much that is in the text, the practice of not learning to engage the Spirit may be keeping us from the wonder and power and transformation and hope and faith and awe that is in the text.

In a world that has found a way to give us unending access to information, it may be harder than ever to be attracted to the Bible—especially if our experience of reading it is dry, distant, and

unabsorbing. Piper’s book will be a massive aid in giving us Jeremiah-like-encounters: “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts” (Jer. 15:16).

Piper emphasizes that the intention of God in His living Word is that we encounter His Word in ways that create exchanges and transformation and impartation to our souls—encounters that are like Jeremiah’s “joy and delight” in our hearts.

From Gutenberg to Google

With the invention of Gutenberg’s printing press came a fresh need for instruction on how to read the Bible...and with the invention of the digital age with its super-abundance of things to read has come a fresh need for instruction on how to read the Bible—supernaturally!

This book will pay dividends every time you pick up your Bible and read it. Whether you read this book in sections or from cover to cover, you will be helped, bad habits will be broken, and fresh encounters with the living God will ensue. May we be people who read the Bible often and do so supernaturally.

KEITH COLLINS

Keith Collins is senior pastor at [Lakeview Christian Center](#) (New Orleans, LA), and serves as a regional leader.