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# WHY I'M PART OF SOVEREIGN GRACE

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

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

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

2. *Ibid*, 64.

3. *Ibid*, 16.

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

### ***My Introduction to Sovereign Grace***

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

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

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

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

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

### ***Our Commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ***

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

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

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

## ***Our Commitment to Sound Doctrine***

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

### **Reformed Theology**

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

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

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

### **A Robust Pneumatology**

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

### **Biblical Complementarianism**

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

## ***Our Commitment to the Local Church***

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

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

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

## ***Our Commitment to Church Planting***

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

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

## ***Our Commitment to Train Pastors***

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

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

### ***Our Commitment to Produce Theologically Rich Music***

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

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

### ***Our Commitment to Build Relationally***

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

### ***A Committed Gospel People***

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



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