

THE PURPOSE OF OUR SHARED VALUES

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I'm pretty certain it was humorist Art Buchwald who, when asked about the purpose of a club he was forming, said "To keep other people out." I thought about that when considering the purpose behind our seven shared values (as well as our *Statement of Faith* and *Book of Church Order*). Some see such attempts to define a denomination as a black mark on Christianity, an attempt "to keep other people out." After all, isn't the church supposed to be just one big happy family?

Well, yes and no. *Yes*, in the sense that all born again believers are united to Jesus and united to one another through him. But the answer is also *no*.

For believers hoping to partner together meaningfully on gospel mission, it is important to be "of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind" (Phil. 2:2). Along these lines, Richard Phillips wisely said: "Denominations allow us to have organizational unity where we have full agreement and allow us to have spiritual unity with other denominations since we are not forced to argue our way to perfect agreement but can accept our differences of opinion on secondary matters."¹ That's precisely what our seven shared values do for us.

The *Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith* serves as the defining document for

1. Richard D. Phillips, *The Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 27.

what we believe within our denomination. But on the other hand, these shared values capture seven convictions that define us, unite us, and keep us on course as we partner together.

Our Values Define Us for Others

Could a church that is Arminian, congregational, egalitarian, and cessationist be Christian? Yes, of course. But would that church be at home in Sovereign Grace? Decidedly not. That's okay; we wouldn't be at home with them either. Could a believer who is convinced of the wisdom of congregational church government be happy in our elder-led churches? Probably not.

Our shared values say unashamedly, "This is who we are," and allow like-minded churches and Christians to join us. Over the years, we have

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been blessed to have individuals and churches contact us about relating because our values attract them. Of late, this has been particularly true of global churches.

Not requiring perfect agreement in all things also frees us to partner with other gospel-centered churches in our cities and towns. It is a joy to support, encourage, serve with, and pray for

our brothers and sisters who don't share all our values but do share the critical value of making disciples of Jesus and loving our neighbors in need.

2. Our Values Unite Us

"Being of full accord and of one mind" becomes vital for every member church and pastor of a denomination. But that doesn't mean we are clones. While there is certainly room for differences on secondary matters and practical applications, there must be unity on matters that we consider essential to our partnership. And that's exactly what our seven shared values provide.

Partnership isn't simply about our values but our mission. Last year at our Pastors Conference, Jared Mellinger talked about our partnership quoting Eckhard Schnabel. Partnership in the gospel is centrally connected to the

advance of the gospel.² Jared went on to say that such partnership actually promotes and protects our gospel mission. We love and are committed to our seven values but must always remember that those values aren't an end, but a means to an end: our gospel mission. And our gospel mission is a means to the greatest end of all: the glory of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in all the earth!

3. Our Values Keep Us on Course

In the normal hustle and bustle of local church life, it can be surprisingly easy for a stated value to slowly cease to function or at least function well. In this way, our seven shared values are an invaluable evaluation tool. Pastoral teams would be wise as part of their cyclical evaluations to ask, "How are our values being expressed practically in our local church life?" They should also ask, "What can we do to shore up a particular value?" A couple of examples will suffice.

We value continuationist pneumatology. We believe the Holy Spirit desires to continually fill each believer with increased power for Christian life and witness, including the giving of His supernatural gifts.³ But are we encouraging our members toward this value, especially new members who perhaps haven't had teaching or experience with continuationism?

How about church planting, outreach, and global mission? Are we informing and encouraging our churches about this part of our mission? Are we creating ways for our members to participate practically through prayer, giving, and participation in a plant or a mission team? Even if it may seem a ways off, are we strategizing and praying about how your local church may plant in the future?

Remembering One Thing

As we consider these things, let's make sure we don't miss one other thing Paul says in Philippians 2: "having the same love." Shared values don't produce denominational harmony apart from an affectionate commitment to one another and Sovereign Grace on the whole.

2. Eckhard Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (Westmont, IL: IVP, 2004), 1460.

3. *Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith*, "The Empowering Ministry of the Spirit."

It's no coincidence that biblical authors regularly connect theological unity with heartfelt affection. Peter puts it this way: "Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind" (1 Pet. 3:8). In Ephesians 4:1-3, Paul finishes his glorious doctrinal unpacking of God's eternal plan for His people, the church, by exhorting them to unity. "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 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."

As we practice our shared values, let's also make sure we continue to share them in that spirit of humility, gentleness, patience, and love. As we used to say and still affirm, "Sovereign Grace is a family of churches." Our seven shared values combined with our affectionate commitment to one another wonderfully define and unite us as a denomination. Our unity is not one of uniformity. It is one of rich diversity gathered around shared values to the glory of God and the mutual edification of our churches.

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